

# Paul's Teaching on Same-Sex Relations in Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 6

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Presented to the Doctrine & Polity Committee of the Church of God  
19 April 2021

## *Introduction*

For some evangelical and Pentecostal Christians, the Bible's stance toward homosexuality may seem self-evident and therefore unworthy of any further comment. If people claim they are Christians, then they either need to submit to the Word of God or live a life of disobedience. The plain-sense reading of the several passages related to same-sex issues seems clear enough—God disdains same-sex sexual relations and therefore Christians should not engage in them.

However, only in recent decades there has been an increasing challenge to this plain-sense reading of specific passages in the Old and New Testaments that had traditionally been read as disdaining same-sex relations as sinful. Some Christian supporters of LGBTQ+ issues have become particularly skilled in launching attacks against the traditional interpretation of what have been labeled the “clobber passages,”<sup>1</sup> two of the more prominent ones in the discussion being Romans 1:26-27 and 1 Corinthians 6:9-10.<sup>2</sup> Declaring that both the passages in their first-century contexts and the Greek terms used there do not prohibit the modern-day understanding of homosexuality (especially a same-sex union within a committed relationship), scholars and non-scholars alike have tried to lay a foundation for Christians supporting same-sex unions and relations. Such views are used to challenge Bible-believing Christians with the claim that neither Jesus nor Paul actually say anything negative about homosexual unions or relations;

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<sup>1</sup> These include the following: Genesis 19; Lev 18:22; 20:13; Rom 1:26; 1 Cor 6:9-10; 1 Tim 1:10.

<sup>2</sup> Some have been written for a non-scholarly audience intending to take their revisionist understanding of the “problematic” texts in Scripture and apply them to challenge non-affirming Christians' belief that the Bible teaches against same-sex relations. For example, see Colby Martin, *Unclobber: Rethinking our Misuse of the Bible on Homosexuality* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016). Others have been written with a little more depth into the language and background of the New Testament yet still strongly urging affirmation of same-sex relations. See Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-sex Relationships* (New York: Convergent Books, 2014). Since they are not scholars themselves, their work relies heavily on the work of others. This entire discussion that suggests the Bible—when understood rightly—does not anywhere disapprove of homosexuality (as we understand it today) began with a book by historian John Boswell in 1980. See John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015, orig. ed. 1980). While most of Boswell's work focuses on how the Christian church handled homosexuality from its beginning to the 1300s, an initial segment discusses his theories around Paul's language in Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 6. Many scholars have challenged his proposals, especially his “exegesis” of New Testament passages. However, Boswell's work is a watershed for academic approaches to understanding Paul's same-sex language in ways that those who are affirming of such lifestyles attempt to find support in the least likely places, namely, the words of Paul. Two earlier books also spawned much of the discussion. One was written by an Anglican priest from England named D. Sherwin Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Tradition* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1955) and the second was coauthored by an American duo Letha Scanzoni and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978). In more recent years, affirming scholars have done more in-depth work. See William Loader, *The New Testament and Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012). Also, see James V. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality. Reforming the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013). We will engage these authors later in this essay.

therefore, they claim, the New Testament is silent on such things and we Christians today do not need to follow the traditional interpretation of Scripture.

Since the claims of these challenges often ride on very sophisticated ways of understanding the Greek language used by Paul in the two prominent passages on same-sex relations (Romans 1:26-27 and 1 Corinthians 6:9-10), this essay will explore the claims of the gay-affirming interpretations and respond with support for the traditional interpretation. By its very nature, the challenge is a complex discussion of Greek language and ancient Greco-Roman views on sexuality,<sup>3</sup> so in this essay we will use the Greek language unapologetically in order to grasp the challenge and offer a response “with gentleness and respect” (1 Pet 3:15 NIV). Readers should not allow discussion of the Greek language and history to discourage them. Each aspect will be explained very carefully so that the reader’s knowledge of Greek is not necessary up front. The following essay is intended to give Christians a detailed response to the challenges from Christians who affirm that same-sex relations are not prohibited in Scripture. It is offered as an irenic rejoinder to those challenges and as a focused response to “contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God’s people” (Jude 3 NIV).

### ***Romans 1:26-27***

*For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, <sup>27</sup> and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error (Rom 1:26-27 NASB).*

In considering this passage from Romans and the next from 1 Corinthians, we will follow a similar pattern in terms of method. We will consider first the **context** of the passage in order to determine the setting in which Paul offers these words. Then we will consider carefully the **text** of the passage itself in order to understand the meaning of specific terms and phrases about same-sex relations. Such careful consideration will examine the Greek terms where relevant and also provide some historical background for Paul’s use of these words. Next, we will present the **challenge** to the traditional way of reading these verses as offered by gay-affirming Christians in recent years. Finally, we will offer a **response** to these views in an effort to expose the problems inherent in them and provide Christians a way to respond to those who say that the Bible does not speak against same-sex relations in these passages. So, here is the approach we will follow:

- 1) context of the passage;
- 2) text of the passage;
- 3) the challenge to the traditional understanding of the passage;
- 4) a response to the challenges.

### **Context of Romans 1:26-27**

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<sup>3</sup> As we shall see in this paper, reconstructing the views about homosexuality in the ancient world leaves a number of holes in our historical understanding. Historians attempt to glean information on same-sex relations from several sources: graffiti that has remained; love poetry; theatrical comedies; historical narratives of same-sex characters or events; laws in various city-states, and (especially) vases with Greek depictions of what appears to be explicit homosexual settings with men. An early contribution to this interpretation was Kenneth J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality: Updated and with a New Postscript* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989; 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1978).

What is Paul attempting to do here in Romans 1? Paul provides a sustained argument in Romans 1:18 – 3:23, advancing toward the conclusion that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23 NASB).<sup>4</sup> Why is Paul demonstrating that Gentiles and Jews alike have sinned? He argues that we cannot save ourselves based on our inherent goodness since it is clear that we have no such goodness. Instead, we have a description of humanity without the Law among the Gentiles, who knew God the Creator but did not recognize or acknowledge this invisible God, turning instead to worship creatures. Then Paul boldly asserts just how sinful the Gentiles had become through this inversion of attention from the Creator to created beings. The list of characteristics and behaviors is one of the longest in the New Testament. One could perhaps hear the Jews in the audience offering verbal assent and nodding their heads when they heard this read at the Roman church. Except here is where Paul’s rhetoric turns toward the Jews: “You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things” (Rom 2:1 NIV). What a surprise! Surely their Judaism brought them something of an advantage before God. Yes it does, says Paul (3:1-2), but not as much as they think in relation to God. They, too, have shown contempt for God’s kindness and remain unrepentant (Rom 2:4-5). *All* have sinned and come short (Rom 3:23).

Our passage falls directly in the middle of Paul laying out the rationale for why human behavior is so “unrighteous” (1:18). All humans “suppress the truth by their wickedness” (ἐν ἀδικίᾳ | *en adikia*)<sup>5</sup> (Rom 1:18 NIV).<sup>6</sup> Humans knew God but did not glorify him or give him thanks (1:21a). The result was their thinking became “futile and their foolish hearts were darkened” (1:21b), which led to them exchanging the glory of God for images of animals (1:22). Then they exchanged the natural use of sexual relations for unnatural same-sex relations. Hence, God’s wrath is revealed against all depravities of humans, which “follow from the radical rebellion of the creature against the Creator (1:24-31).”<sup>7</sup> In commenting on this passage, Robert Jewett expresses Paul’s point with precision: “Life that does not take account of the reality of God is doomed to the unreal world of self-deception.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Text of Romans 1:26-27**

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. William Simmons, a colleague at Lee University, has pointed out to me that Paul repeats this idea of *all* several times in this very passage: “all ungodliness and unrighteousness” (Rom 1:18); all who sinned without the Law will perish without the Law (2:12); all are “under sin”—both Jews and Greeks (3:9); all have turned away from God so there is no one that does good (3:12). There is a universal effect of sin on *all* humans.

<sup>5</sup> Throughout this essay, I will insert Greek words (usually parenthetically) after the English words have been given. The Greek lettering will be first and the after it a dividing line (|) with the Greek letters transliterated into italicized English letters. Even if readers are unfamiliar with the Greek letters, they may be able to recognize something from the English transliteration. For the most part, what the Greek words mean will be clear from the English text itself. When more may be needed to explain nuances, these will occur in footnotes (as in footnote 6 below).

<sup>6</sup> Wickedness here could be better expressed by “ungodliness” or “unrighteousness” since it is the negation of godliness or righteousness. Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation. A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), 384.

<sup>7</sup> Hays, *The Moral Vision*, 384.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, in *Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Eldon Jay Epp (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 158.

Three times in Romans 1:18-32, Paul repeats “God gave them over,” or “delivered them.” It occurs in Romans 1:24, 26, and 28<sup>9</sup>:

“Therefore, **God handed them over**<sup>10</sup> to the desires of their hearts for impurity<sup>11</sup> of their bodies among them.” (1:24).

“For this very reason, **God handed them over** to degrading passions, for example,<sup>12</sup> their females exchanged the natural function for that which is contrary to nature.” (1:26).

“And as they did not see fit to hold God in their knowledge, **God handed them over** to an unfitting mind to do the things that are improper.” (1:28).<sup>13</sup>

Verse 26 comes in the middle of this three-pronged approach, which speaks of God’s judgment and wrath on humans who suppress the truth and refuse to acknowledge God the creator (Rom 1:18-19). The entire section demonstrates the truth of human rebellion against God, which is especially visible in the downward spiral of the Gentiles into sin. The righteousness of God is revealed in 1:17 and the concomitant wrath of God is revealed in 1:18 (the beginning of this section). God’s judgment is found in “handing them over” to passions that dishonor people who act on them.

*v. 26a: God handed them over to the desires of their hearts...to degrading passions*

“For this very reason,” Paul begins in verse 26, God “gave them over” (παρέδωκεν | *paredōken*)<sup>14</sup> to degrading or dishonoring passions (εἰς πάθη ἀτιμίας | *eis pathē atimias*). As Robert Gagnon states, “The dishonoring in Rom 1:26, as in 1:24, is a dishonoring not merely of society nor even primarily of God but rather of one’s own self as a human being ‘gendered’ by

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<sup>9</sup> These three verses that follow are my translations.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Jewett notes that this verb followed by the dative case and then by an *eis* clause indicates a technical expression for the authorities to turn someone over to official custody for punishment. See Robert Jewett, *Romans*, 167.

<sup>11</sup> “impurity” or “uncleanness,” in connection with the “bodies” in this verse points rather clearly to sins of a sexual nature. In this moral sense in the NT, Jewett says that it demonstrates “behavior that ‘excludes man from fellowship with God.’” Jewett, *Romans*, 168. William Loader notes that Paul views these desires leading people to perform sexual acts. Loader, *The New Testament and Sexuality*, 303.

<sup>12</sup> Paul connects an important Greek word, “for” (γάρ | *gar*), which points out the examples for these degrading passions that follow. Jewett, *Romans*, 173.

<sup>13</sup> Robin Scroggs offers insight into what the phrase, “God gave them up” means in this context. It means that “people now living in the false reality do what they choose. God does not force them into such false actions; his judgment lies in his leaving them where they want to be, in actions which . . . they think to be good and right. This is the ultimate irony of their fate. See Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 113.

<sup>14</sup> This verb is an Aorist Active Indicative, pointing to completed action in the past. God has consigned or has delivered over humans for punishment, which was received already in their own bodies.

God in creation and discernable in the material constitution of the human body.”<sup>15</sup> Paul offers two examples to illustrate these dishonoring passions.<sup>16</sup>

*v. 26b: their females exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural*

First, their women exchanged the natural use of the body for sexual activity (something that God made as good) into a use contrary to nature—against nature (παρὰ φύσιν | *para physin*). As a result of the dishonoring passions, Paul says that “their females” (θήλειαι | *thēleiai*) exchanged the “natural use” (τὴν φυσικὴν χρῆσιν | *tēn physikēn chrēsin*) for the “use against nature,” or “unnatural use” (εἰς τὴν παρὰ φύσιν | *eis tēn para physin*). Presumably the “their” here refers to the Gentiles whom Paul is describing in their sins. Rather than using a more generic word like “woman” (γυνή | *gynē*), Paul uses a clear gender term, “females” (θήλειαι | *thēleiai*). He will parallel this in the next verse with “males” (ἄρσενες | *arsenes*) instead of “men” (ἄνδρες | *andres*). In addition to drawing a parallel to “male and female” from the creation narrative (Gen 1:26-27), Paul seems to be after some specificity here in making it clear that in this setting, the females are operating in a sexual act in an unfitting, unnatural manner.<sup>17</sup> This is also made clear by the use of the word χρῆσιν | *chrēsin*, which means “function” or “use” especially in connection with sexual intercourse.<sup>18</sup> There is a natural way to have sex and an unnatural way, to say it bluntly. The fact that females were engaged in sexual acts with females and that males were engaged in sexual acts with males was evidence of their rebellion against God who made them male and female. It was not the way God originally intended it to be.<sup>19</sup> The complementarity of the sexes in their physical forms at creation in Genesis was “good” in God’s sight. Indeed, Paul’s use of “females” and “males” here instead of “women/men” follows the translation of the Septuagint into Greek, which Paul undoubtedly knew: God created them “male and female” (ἄρσεν καὶ θήλυ | *arsen kai thēly*).<sup>20</sup> Robert Gagnon summarizes Paul’s point with these words:

Instead of acknowledging that God had made them ‘male and female’ and had called on them to copulate and procreate, they denied the transparent complementarity of their sexuality and engaged in sex with the same sex, indulging themselves in irresponsible sexual passion on which stable and

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<sup>15</sup> Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 235.

<sup>16</sup> While “passions” can be positive or negative in the ancient world, James D. G. Dunn rightly notes that here it holds entirely a “sexual nature.” See Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 38a, ed. Bruce Metzger, David Hubbard, and Glenn Barker (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1988), 64. Douglas J. Moo makes the same connection of passions with “illicit” sex. See Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 113-14.

<sup>17</sup> Moo notes that when Paul uses “females/males” instead of “men/women,” he is stressing “the element of sexual distinctiveness and throws into relief the perversity of homosexuality by implicitly juxtaposing its confusion of the sexes with the divine ‘male and female he created them.’” Moo, *Romans*, 114, fn114.

<sup>18</sup> Dunn, *Romans*, 64; also, Loader, *The New Testament and Sexuality*, 309.

<sup>19</sup> As Bernadette Brooten comments, “I believe that Paul used the word ‘exchanged’ to indicate that people knew the natural sexual order of the universe and left it behind.” See Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 244.

<sup>20</sup> Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 290, notes this connection with the Septuagint (LXX) Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament and also one between Romans 1:23 and Gen 1:26 in the LXX. He calls these “intertextual echoes” (291). Also, it should be noted here that Rom 1:26 is the only place in the OT or NT where female same-sex acts are discussed.

productive family structures could not be built.<sup>21</sup>

v. 27: likewise, the males abandoned the natural function of the female...males with males

Second, “in a similar manner, the males left behind the natural function of the female in the sexual act and instead replaced it with males and were burned up with their sexual craving for one another.”<sup>22</sup> Just as degrading passions brought females to exchange natural sexual relations with ones contrary to nature, so too Paul continues to show how males “having left behind” (ἀφέντες | *aphentes*)<sup>23</sup> the heterosexual relationships as God’s creation intended, replaced them with same-sex sexual acts. In case the reader had missed the clear expressions to this point, Paul clarifies with rather vivid imagery through his precise words: “males *in* males” (ἄρσενες ἐν ἄρσεσιν | *arsenes en arsesin*).<sup>24</sup> This language seems to echo the language of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, where males are forbidden to lie with males as with a woman.

In fulfilling their burning passions for members of the same sex, such individuals receive the payback “in themselves” for what was due to them. In other words, these people receive back the penalty in return for “committing indecency” (τὴν ἀσχημοσύνην κατεργαζόμενοι | *tēn aschēmosunēn katergazomenoi*).<sup>25</sup> This penalty was “due them for their error” or “wandering in delusion” (ἦν ἔδει τῆς πλάνης αὐτῶν | *hēn edei tēs planēs autōn*).<sup>26</sup>

### ***Challenges to Traditional Interpretations of Romans 1***

Those supporting same-sex relations among Christians today find this passage in Romans 1 the most difficult to overcome.<sup>27</sup> As one supporter of same-sex relations for Christians notes, if someone claims to follow Christ and is in a same-sex relationship, then “he or she would appear to have been swept up by Paul and deposited in the dustbin of condemnation.”<sup>28</sup> Such supporters offer challenges to traditional interpretations, urging that scholarship has a new reading of these texts that reassigns the characters who are being “deposited in the dustbin of condemnation” to individuals outside of homosexuality as understood today. On the other hand, many scholars view this passage as one that reflects Paul’s disdain of same-sex relations and therefore as

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<sup>21</sup> Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practices*, 291.

<sup>22</sup> My translation.

<sup>23</sup> Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 237. The word is an Aorist Participle, pointing to a completed act in the past.

<sup>24</sup> As a preposition, *en* could mean “in” or with a plural object, “among.” It can also mean “by” or “with.” What I am pointing to here is the possibility of viewing this “in” more literally as male penetration on males. It may not have been Paul’s intent, but it seems not beyond the realm of feasibility. See Kevin DeYoung, *What Does the Bible Teach about Homosexuality?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 65, fn1 who notes something similar.

<sup>25</sup> Jewett notes that *aschēmosunē* was “used for both ‘unseemly deed’ and for sexual organs, whose privacy remained a matter of a substantial taboo in Judaism” (Jewett, *Romans*, 179). Since the form is *singular* in this text (τὴν ἀσχημοσύνην | *tēn aschēmosunēn*) but follows a *plural* noun for “males” (ἄρσενες | *arsenes*), Jewett believes it should be translated with the participle (κατεργαζόμενοι | *katergazomenoi*) in this way: “males who work up their shameful member in [other] males...” Jewett, *Romans*, 163 and 179. Jewett also notes that the participle, when connected with sexual intercourse in this context, would have a more physiological meaning reflecting the idea among some Greeks that reproductive fluids were in the brain and “frothed up into semen at the moment of ejaculation” (Jewett, 179, esp. fn155). His translation is not only a convincing layout of the complex use of phrases here in Greek, but also matches the anatomical understanding of sex in the ancient world. It is difficult to see this language as anything but same-sex sexual acts that are disdained by God (and Paul).

<sup>26</sup> Dunn, *Romans*, 65.

<sup>27</sup> Colby Martin, *Unclobber*, 116.

<sup>28</sup> Vines, *God and the Gay Christian*, 99.

something deserving the wrath of God. Several challenges have arisen recently that urge the church to revise their traditional “homophobic” view.

In 1980, the historian John Boswell argued that the early Christian church did not have a negative view of homosexual acts but was rather silent or even nonchalant about them. How does he understand what Paul says in Romans 1? Paul, he says, does not condemn homosexuality: “...what [Paul] derogates are homosexual acts committed by apparently heterosexual persons.”<sup>29</sup> How does he arrive at this conclusion? He understands Paul to say that the *natural use* was exchanged for the *unnatural* in sexual relations. If “natural” refers to heterosexual relations, then unnatural (he claims) refers to heterosexuals leaving their “natural” proclivities in sex and turning them in for unnatural ones. One cannot “exchange” something that one does not already possess. If Paul was referring to *homosexuals* “exchanging” their natural use of sex for unnatural, then the charge does not seem to make sense to Boswell. What is natural for the homosexual are same-sex sexual acts. Therefore, Boswell claims that Paul “did not discuss gay *persons* but only homosexual acts committed by heterosexual persons.”<sup>30</sup>

Underlying this interpretation is Boswell’s insistence that the “New Testament takes no demonstrable position on homosexuality.”<sup>31</sup> In part, he arrives at this position by arguing several subpoints on Romans 1, most of which other supporters of same-sex relations for Christians have taken up after him.

### **Challenge One: “Contrary to nature”**

**First**, Boswell claims that the phrase “contrary to nature” (παρὰ φύσιν | *para physin*) is not a correct translation. Instead it should be translated “beyond or in excess of nature.” Because *para* as a preposition means “in excess of, beyond,” Boswell suggests it is incorrect to translate it as “against” or “contrary to” here.<sup>32</sup> It refers to *out of the ordinary* behavior.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 109. It is important to remember that Boswell is a historian, not a biblical scholar or even a theologian. Moreover, he was gay and had a vested interest in reinterpreting these passages (as do others). Yet he is making rather novel claims about Paul and the book of Romans. As a support for affirming stances among the gay community, the book was very effective. It offers a tightly woven argument that the early Christians (even in the NT period) did not view homosexuality as sinful and that the negative opinion came throughout time, culminating in the medieval times and forward to the last century. Many reviewers have placed his research under scrutiny and, at least from the biblical side, have found much lacking in his provocative thesis. For one careful yet powerful critique of Boswell’s work, see Richard B. Hays, “Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell’s Exegesis of Romans 1,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 14, no. 1 (Spr 1986):184-217. Nonetheless, this remains the basis for many supporters who affirm same-sex relations today.

<sup>30</sup> Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 109. Boswell uses Chrysostom, an early church father from the 400s, to support his interpretation. In a lengthy review of Boswell’s book, David Wright notes that this is not a full accounting of Chrysostom’s ideas on this passage and homosexuality. See David F. Wright, “Homosexuals or Prostitutes? The Meaning of ΑΡΣΕΝΟΚΟΙΤΑΙ (1 Cor. 6:9, 1 Tim. 1:10),” *Vigiliae Christianae* 38 (1984): 125-153, on Chrysostom, 142-43.

<sup>31</sup> Boswell, 117.

<sup>32</sup> Boswell, 111.

<sup>33</sup> As we shall see, understanding precisely what *nature* means in Paul’s phrase is complicated by the various Greco-Roman understandings of nature. Is it equal to “culture?” Craig Williams notes, “Within the Latin textual tradition, for example, *natura* sometimes refers to the way things generally *are*, that is, observable patterns in the world around us; sometimes to the way they *should be*, that is, the reconstructed dictates of some transcendent imperative; and sometimes to the characteristic and inherent qualities of some specific being, that is, the nature *of* something; and much the same can be said of the concept of ‘nature’ in other cultural settings.” See Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 269-70.

**Second**, Paul would not have understood the word “nature” as we might hear it today. The concept of “natural law” was another 1000 years in the future, so Paul could not have meant “nature” as what was assigned to creation or the natural world, against which standard the Roman readers/hearers could judge what was intended. Instead, Boswell argues that Paul uses “nature” here as elsewhere as a “character” of some person or groups.<sup>34</sup> For example, Paul calls one group “Jews by nature” (ἡμεῖς φύσει Ἰουδαῖοι | *hēmeis physei Ioudaioi*) (Gal 2:15). Hence, “nature” is not an abstract concept to which all humans conform, but the *personal* nature of the Gentiles described.<sup>35</sup>

Another writer following Boswell’s idea takes it further. Matthew Vines suggests that for the ancients, natural/unnatural were simply synonymous with normal/abnormal.<sup>36</sup> In that day, the male had the active, aggressive, “penetrating” role and the female the passive, submissive role. Since Paul is arguing that God handed these humans over to “degrading passions” (Rom 1:26), he is not derogating any particular sexual acts per se but rather those that are abnormal, excessive, or beyond the normal ways of intercourse. What would this have been for the Greco-Roman world? Vines points out that the male was expected to be the active one in a sexual act while the female was expected to be the passive one in that act. If those roles were reversed, the ancient world had much negative to say about it.<sup>37</sup> This abnormal form of excess passion is what Paul means by “degrading passions.” Hence, Paul speaks only against heterosexuals who long for more sex and move toward the abnormal acts with other partners—males with males, females with females, one playing an active role and the other a passive role in the couplet.<sup>38</sup> In this way, Vines argues, Paul’s intention was never to speak against loving and faithful same-sex relationships, but rather against lustful ones that exhibited an uncustomary level of excess and shame. The type of behavior Paul is decrying is not the same as the “intimate, committed relationships of gay Christians.”<sup>39</sup> Therefore, Paul did not assign gay people to the dustbin of condemnation. Yet, Vines concedes that if Paul’s “moral objection” in Romans 1 “was to the anatomical sameness of the partners, not primarily to lustfulness, then that rationale would extend to all same-sex relationships.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Boswell, 110.

<sup>35</sup> Boswell, 111. Colby Martin takes the idea of “natural” a different direction yet with the same intended result. Martin argues that within Paul’s timeframe, writers spoke of the “natural” way of sex to be one in which procreation was intended; the unnatural way of sex was if procreation was not intended and/or not possible (as same-sex sexual acts imply). Hellenistic Jews, says Martin, were rather unified on this point. Therefore, he argues that Paul would have understood it similarly to Philo and Josephus. See Martin, *Unclobber*, 131

<sup>36</sup> Vines, *God and the Gay Christian*, 111.

<sup>37</sup> Vines, *God and the Gay Christian*, 98-99.

<sup>38</sup> Vines, *God and the Gay Christian*, 103-07; also, Martin, *Unclobber*, 128-30. Vines summarizes his view succinctly: “...the concept of same-sex orientation didn’t exist in the ancient world. Prior to recent generations, same-sex behavior was widely understood to be the product of sexual excess, not the expression of a sexual orientation.” Vines, *God and the Gay Christian*, 129. We will address this challenge later in the essay. For now, it seems that “degrading passions” surely was in part a product of sexual excess, but one needs to hear the context of Paul’s statements in order to classify what and how these passions were dishonoring. This is especially true in a Roman culture where shame/honor were the currency of life. See Jewett, *Romans*, 46-51 and 137-47.

<sup>39</sup> Vines, *God and the Gay Christian*, 99.

<sup>40</sup> Vines, *God and the Gay Christian*, 99-100.



## Response to Challenge One: ‘Contrary to Nature’

**First**, what does *παρὰ φύσιν* | *para physin* (“contrary to nature”) really mean for Paul? Boswell has pointed to a translation of the preposition *para* to mean “beyond” or “in excess,” thereby rendering Paul’s phrase as pointing to sexual acts that are out of the ordinary or beyond the bounds of custom. This Greek phrase goes back to Plato, about 400 years before Paul. In arguing for society with just laws, Plato sets three speakers in dialogue in order to achieve an understanding of an ideal society crafted with ideal laws. In the context of educating the young, the Athenian speaker notes a law that is very old and “in accord with nature” (*κατὰ φύσιν* | *kata physin*), namely “the enjoyment of sexual pleasure not only by human beings but also by animals.”<sup>41</sup> Yet this sexual enjoyment *κατὰ φύσιν* | *kata physin* (according to nature) does not extend to same-sex sexual acts: “...the intercourse of men with men, or of women with women, is contrary to nature” (*παρὰ φύσιν* | *para physin*).<sup>42</sup> Later in the *Laws*, Plato argues strongly against “sexual intercourse with males, including young males, as one does with females.”<sup>43</sup> He views this prohibition as following nature. While “nature” can have several meanings in Plato’s works, here it seems to point directly to the natural world (especially when referencing how animals engage in intercourse). Therefore, men should “use sexual intercourse for procreation, as in nature,” and “refrain from the male, if they are to avoid intentionally killing the human race and sowing their seed, as it were, on rocks and stone where a man’s fertile seed will never take root...”<sup>44</sup> Hence, Plato’s law would be “brought into line with nature,”<sup>45</sup> making it against the law to have “unnatural intercourse with males.”<sup>46</sup>

**Second**, did Paul know Plato or his ideas on same-sex relations? We cannot say for sure, but he would have been well acquainted with such popular phrases as “against nature” and “according to nature” in the Koine Greek language. Several documents from the first century BC to the first century AD point to a similar understanding with Plato regarding this phrase. The first is found in the writings of Flavius Josephus, a Jewish historian contemporary with the time of Paul (ca. AD 37-100). In his defense, *Against Apion*, Josephus lays out the Jewish reasoning against same-sex practices. It is an “unnatural (*παρὰ φύσιν* | *para physin*) and impudent lust, which makes them [the Eleans and Thebans] lie with males (*πρὸς ἄρρενας μίξεως* | *pros arrenas mixeōs*).”<sup>47</sup> The Greeks, he claimed, contrived stories of incest and same-sex practices (*τῶν*

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<sup>41</sup> Plato, *Laws* 1. 636c, in *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of Basic Documents*, 252. This section was translated by David Leitao.

<sup>42</sup> I should note here that Leitao’s translation offers this phrase: “seems to be beyond nature,” (Hubbard, 252). Cf. the translation by Taylor in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato, Including the Letters*, trans. A. E. Taylor, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Bollingen Series LXXI (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 1237: “...this pleasure is held to have been granted by nature to male and female when conjoined for the work of procreation, **the crime of male with male, or female with female**, is an **outrage on nature** and a capital surrender to lust of pleasure.” (My emphasis).

<sup>43</sup> Plato, *Laws*, 1.836c, *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome*, trans. David Leitao, 253.

<sup>44</sup> Plato, *Laws* 1.838e-839a, *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome*, trans. David Leitao, 256.

<sup>45</sup> Plato, *Laws*, 1. 839a, *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome*, trans. David Leitao, 256. *Laws* appears quite late in Plato’s works. It is interesting to note the difference between his *Symposium*, which engages in intense dialogue concerning love and particularly same-sex love and this legal approach to disallowing it in his ideal society.

<sup>46</sup> Plato, *Laws*, 1.841d, *Collected Dialogues of Plato*, trans. A. E. Taylor, 1406. For a detailed yet concise portrayal of how *φύσις* | *physis* and *παρὰ φύσιν* | *para physin* were used in the Greco-Roman world, see Brooten, *Love between Women*, 251, fn103.

<sup>47</sup> Literally, this last phrase means, “the mixing of males.” Flavius Josephus, *Against Apion*, 2.38 in *The Works of Josephus*, trans. William Whitson (np: FaithPoint Press, 2006), 858. The Greek is from Loeb’s Classical Library, whose English translator apparently decided not to translate the phrases fully or clearly (perhaps out of modesty?).

ἀρρένων μίξεις | *tōn arrenōn mixeis*) about their gods so that in some way they could offer a defense “for their own absurd and unnatural (παρὰ φύσιν | *para physin*) pleasures.”<sup>48</sup> Further, the Jewish laws about marriage, “owns no other mixture of sexes but that which nature hath appointed, of a man with his wife...” (*Against Apion*, 2.25, 854). Once again, the term “unnatural” appears in ways very similar to Paul (namely, παρὰ φύσιν | *para physin*).

Another text from Hellenistic Judaism is the deuterocanonical book, *Wisdom of Solomon* (14:22-27), which looks very similar to Paul’s description of sin in Romans 1:18-31.<sup>49</sup> The writer states that ignorance of God among pagans brought about great strife, including “frenzied revels with strange customs,” and “they no longer keep either their lives or their marriages pure...” (*Wisdom* 14:22-24 NRSV). Yet the focal point of concern relates to one phrase in relation to sexual sins: “...confusion over what is good, forgetfulness of favors, defiling of souls, sexual perversion, disorder in marriages, adultery, and debauchery” (*Wisdom* 14:26 NRSV). The phrase “sexual perversion” seems rather vague and general in its force. It is the Greek phrase γενέσεως ἐναλλαγῆ | *geneseōs enallagē*, which could refer to an “interchange of sexual roles” or “confusion of sex.”<sup>50</sup> Since nothing like this phrase occurs elsewhere in all of extant Greek literature (biblical or otherwise), it is difficult to determine what precisely this phrase meant to its author and readers. However, it is important to note that in this writing, the author has twice referred to Sodom (10:6-9 and 19:14), which makes it feasible that he had in mind the sexually immoral practices from Sodom. In the context of 14:26, the subject is related to sexual sins (even “defiling of souls” is a euphemism for the taint of immoral sex). While we cannot be certain of its precise meaning here, it is in line with both Josephus and Paul to view this “sexual twistedness” as an attempt to interchange roles in the sexual act and thereby not fulfill the functionary purpose of procreation.

Yet another text is from the pseudepigrapha of Jewish literature (meaning, the writings that portray themselves as if written in ancient Judaism, but in reality are from the late era of Second Temple Judaism, at times, contemporary with Jesus and Paul). One of these is the writing called *Testament of Naphtali* (supposedly the last statements of one of the 12 leaders of the tribes of Israel). “Having gone astray and forsaken the Lord, the Gentiles changed their order (ἠλλιώσαν τὴν τάξιν αὐτῶν | *ēllioōsan tēn taxin autōn*)...But you shall not be so, my children... so that you will not become as Sodom, which changed the order of its nature (ἐνήλλαξε τάξιν φύσεως αὐτῆς | *enēllaxe taxin physeōs autēs*).” (*T. Naph.* 3.3-4).<sup>51</sup> Notice that the same verbal form (“changed”) is used as with Paul in Romans 1, but the “object” of the verb is “order” (τάξιν

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“...and the people of Elis and Thebes [were bound in the end to condemn their contempt for marriage and] the unnatural vice so rampant among them.” See Josephus, *Against Apion*, II.273-74 (37) in *Josephus I: The Life; Against Apion*, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray, Loeb Classical Library 186, ed. Jeffrey Henderson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), 403. The Greek is on page 402.

<sup>48</sup> Josephus, *Against Apion*, 2.38, trans. Whitson; for the Greek, Josephus, *Against Apion*, II.275, in Loeb’s Classical Library, 402. Here Thackeray, the Loeb translator, renders this “the practice of sodomy.”

<sup>49</sup> Indeed, given the numerous times the *Wisdom of Solomon* is referenced in Romans, Paul clearly knew this text—or one very similar.

<sup>50</sup> See James B. De Young, “A Critique of Prohomosexual Interpretations of the Old Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 587, no. 4 (Oct-Dec 1990): 427-454, here 443. E. Goodspeed’s translation of *The Apocrypha* offers this latter phrase, “confusion of sex.” See *The Apocrypha*, trans. Edgar Goodspeed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939) at *Wisdom of Solomon* 14:26. William Loader states that this phrase may mean change or inversion and may very well refer to same-sex relations because γενέσεως | *geneseōs* seems to point to the impact this inversion has on reproduction. See Loader, *Pseudepigrapha on Sexuality: Attitudes Toward Sexuality in Apocalypses, Testaments, Legends, Wisdom, and Related Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 421.

<sup>51</sup> This translation and the Greek inserts are offered by Robert Jewett, *Romans*, 174.

| *taxin*) in the first part and order “of its nature” (φύσεως | *physeōs*) in the second part. This language seems very similar to Paul’s own words in Romans 1:26-27, especially in its understanding of nature as something inherent in the order of creation.

**Third**, Philo (ca. 20 BC – 45 AD), a Jewish philosopher who was a contemporary with Paul, wrote specifically in these terms when describing the sins of Sodom. Due to excess wealth, Sodom began to indulge in “forbidden forms of intercourse.” They cast off “the law of nature” (τὸν τῆς φύσεως νόμον | *ton tēs physeōs nomon*).<sup>52</sup> Philo continues, “Not only in their mad lust for women did they violate the marriages of their neighbors, but also men mounted males (ἄνδρες ὄντες ἄρρεσιν ἐπιβαίνοντες | *andres ontes arresin epibainontes*) without respect for the sex nature (φύσιν | *physin*) which the active partner shares with the passive...”<sup>53</sup> The desire for men and women to share a connection in intercourse and beget children is “natural” (κατὰ φύσιν | *kata physin*), but the inhabitants of Sodom turned toward this “unnatural (παρὰ φύσιν) and forbidden intercourse.”<sup>54</sup>

For Philo, this is why the Law of Moses offered a clear rationale for guarding the assembly in the temple so that several types of people are denied entrance into it: “those who are afflicted with the disease of effeminacy (ἀπὸ τῶν νοσοῦντων τὴν θήλειαν νόσον | *apo tōn nosountōn tēn thēlian noson*), men-women (ἀνδρογύνων | *androgynōn*), who, having adulterated the coinage of nature (οἱ τὸ φύσεως νόμισμα | *hoi to physeōs nomisma*), are willingly driven into the appearance and treatment of licentious women.”<sup>55</sup> These “men-women” are degrading “the precious coinage of [their] nature” and deserve to die without redemption.<sup>56</sup> Further, those who are “devoted to the love of boys” (παιδεραστῆς | *paidērastēs*) deserve death as punishment since they are pursuing “that pleasure which is contrary to nature” (παρὰ φύσιν | *para physin*).<sup>57</sup>

While the phrase “contrary to nature” and “according to nature” can be found in Stoic literature of Paul’s day,<sup>58</sup> it is probably Paul’s reliance on his own Jewish background that can offer plenteous support for his own use of these terms in Greek. It seems clear that Paul’s phrase, “against nature,” has a substantial history in the Greek language for precisely what it sounds like in a “plain sense” reading of the text.<sup>59</sup> Nature here refers to the way God has made things—

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<sup>52</sup> Philo, *On Abraham (de abrahamo)*, XXVI, 135, in *Philo VI*, trans. F. H. Colson in Loeb Classical Library, 289, ed. Jeffrey Henderson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935), 71.

<sup>53</sup> Philo, *On Abraham*, XXVI, 135, Loeb, 70-71.

<sup>54</sup> Philo, *On Abraham*, XXVII, 137, Loeb, 70-71.

<sup>55</sup> Philo, *The Special Laws (de specialibus legibus)*, I. LX. 326, trans. Yonge, 565. The Greek is from *Philo VII, Special Laws*, trans. F. H. Colson, Loeb, 288-89.

<sup>56</sup> Philo, *The Special Laws*, III. VII. 38, trans. Yonge, 598. The Greek is from Philo, *Special Laws*, trans. Colson, Loeb, 498.

<sup>57</sup> Philo, *Special Laws*, III. VII.39, Loeb, 498. To be clear, Philo offered arguments against pederasty and possibly broader homosexuality by noting how the divine order of creation is side-stepped by these forms of non-procreative sex acts. This concept is clearly in Philo’s mind when discussing same-sex sex acts. However, in Paul, there are no arguments against same-sex acts based on procreation. We can even read his comment in 1 Cor 7:9 (it is better to marry than burn with passion) as positive words about sexual intercourse intended primarily for pleasure. What is certain here, however, is that “like Philo, his understanding of nature assumes the divine order of creation, his use of θήλειαι and ἄρσενες reflecting Gen 1, 27, doubtless also understood, as in Philo, in association with the Leviticus prohibitions...” See William Loader, “Reading Romans 1 on Homosexuality in the Light of Biblical/Jewish and Greco-Roman Perspectives of its Time,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 108, no. 1 (2017): 110-149, here 138.

<sup>58</sup> Jewett, *Romans*, 175.

<sup>59</sup> See Christopher Seitz, “Sexuality and Scripture’s Plain Sense: The Christian Community and the Law of God,” in *Homosexuality, Science, and the ‘Plain Sense’ of Scripture*, ed. David L. Balch (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 190-91.

things that are visible evidence of the Creator (Rom 1:19). God has made plain enough the evidence about God for people to see. In a similar way, the visible evidence of male-female complementarity of sexual organs points to the Creator's intention.<sup>60</sup> William Loader, an Australian New Testament scholar, understands Paul's words here as influenced by his Jewish background:

With the reference to female and male here, he connects with creation, to which he has alluded specifically in 1:23. It is highly probable that he believes, that the creation story implies that only sexual relations between male and female (and then only in marriage) are acceptable before God. It was inevitable that Jewish authors would associate nature and divine creation and ordering as its foundation. It is also hard to imagine that Paul would approach such issues without awareness of the prohibition of same-sex relations in Lev 18:22 and 20:13, which had come to be applied to both men and women. His discussion shows that he is not focused only on acts, but on both acts and attitudes, embodied in misdirected passions. Both run contrary to nature as God's created order.<sup>61</sup>

Further, as Robert Gagnon states, "Not the innateness of one's passions, which in Paul's understanding were perverted by the fall, shows us how to behave, but rather the material creation around human beings and the bodily design of humans themselves, guiding us into the truth about the nature of God and the nature of human sexuality respectively."<sup>62</sup>

### **Challenge Two: Pederasty—not Same-Sex Acts**

Another writer has posed a different way to understand "contrary to nature," thereby creating a different challenge to the traditional reading. Robin Scroggs, a New Testament scholar, has proposed that this phrase, "against nature," cannot refer to natural law or an interpretation of Genesis 1 in creation, but rather refers to Greco-Roman pederasty—the practice of an adult male (usually married) having sex with a minor of the same sex (usually a teenager about 12-18 years old).<sup>63</sup> Among the Greeks and Romans, pederasty was commonplace, but opinions about it varied.<sup>64</sup> The Hellenistic Jews of the same period uniformly found this practice

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<sup>60</sup> Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 257. For a different reading on complementarity of the sexes, see James Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, 26-36.

<sup>61</sup> Loader, *The New Testament and Sexuality*, 313-15.

<sup>62</sup> Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 391.

<sup>63</sup> Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 114-15; for the age of the "passive" sexual partner, see David M. Halperin, "Two Views of Greek Love: Harald Patzer and Michel Foucault," in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 55. Halperin relies on Patzer for this information about age.

<sup>64</sup> The sources are quite clear from the ancient world that for both Greeks and Romans one of the more common forms of homosexual relations involved pederasty. However, as I will show later, I do not believe this was the only form of same-sex relations in the ancient world, as is implied in a number of gay-affirming sources. Scroggs wants to state that pederasty was *the* form of homosexuality in ancient Greece and Rome, denying any significant same-sex relationships outside of this format. Mark Smith notes that Scroggs relied too heavily on Dover's *Greek Homosexuality*, the first edition (1978), and did not have the second edition (1989) when he wrote his book in 1984. Dover changed his view on pederasty, stating that the *eromenos* (the passive, younger partner) could indeed derive "pleasure from copulation," and hence express feelings other than negatives ones about this relationship. He admits this in his postscript in 1989: "I underrated the evidence against the assumption" that the passive partner never expressed or felt any form of mutual love in the relationship. Further, pederasty was not always exploitative. Dover,

most disconcerting. Philo viewed Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 as addressing the evil of pederasty.<sup>65</sup> The older male is called the “lover” (παιδεραστῆς | *paiderastēs*) and the passive partner—an “effeminate male”—is called ἀνδρόγυνος | *androgynos* (“male-female”).<sup>66</sup> Philo notes that some of these younger males pay special attention to making their hair long, using rouge, anointing their skin with perfume, all for the purpose of turning their male natures into female natures. While the Roman view on such pederasty fluctuated between positive and negative assessments around the time of Christ and Paul, Hellenistic Jews uniformly found in this practice something “against nature” (παρὰ φύσιν | *para physin*).<sup>67</sup> Scroggs believes this is what Paul was attacking: “Paul thinks of pederasty, and perhaps the more degraded forms of it, when he is attacking homosexuality.”<sup>68</sup> Such forms of same-sex relations were exploitative and viewed as specially degrading to the passive (younger) partner. This is what Paul meant by unnatural, says Scroggs.

### **Response to Challenge Two: Pederasty or Same-Sex Acts?**

Does the phrase “contrary to nature” refer only to pederasty, as Robin Scroggs suggests? Is pederasty what Paul had in mind by calling it “unnatural” (παρὰ φύσιν)? To be sure, Hellenistic Jews found the rather commonplace arrangement of pederasty among Greeks and Romans to be most obnoxious. Philo tends to focus almost entirely on pederasty as *the* sin of the Gentiles, even reckoning the Leviticus 18 and 20 passages as speaking against the pederasty of his day.<sup>69</sup> Philo has at least six different terms to describe pederasty:

1. παιδεραστεῖν | *paiderastein* (pederasty);

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*Greek Homosexuality*, 204. Dover pointed out that some same-sex relationships endured throughout adulthood. See Mark D. Smith, “Ancient Bisexuality and the Interpretation of Romans 1:26-27,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64, no. 2 (1996): 223-56; here, 232. Smith also notes problems with Scroggs’ chronology. After the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC), “evidence for pederastic practices declines considerably, though other homosexual practices continue unabated” (233). Scroggs portrayal does not take this sufficiently into account. William Loader notes a similar point that Dover has changed his opinion from the first to second editions on these points. Loader, *The New Testament and Sexuality*, 324.

<sup>65</sup> Philo, *The Special Laws*, III.37-42, in *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. C. D. Yonge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 597-8.

<sup>66</sup> Philo, *Special Laws*, III.38-39, in *Philo VII, Special Laws*, trans. F. H. Colson, Loeb Classical Library, 320, ed. Jeffrey Henderson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937), 498.

<sup>67</sup> Philo, *Special Laws*, III.39, Loeb, 498. My mind turned to a well-known public reference to these “call boys” in Cicero’s *Oration Against Catiline*. When maligning the character of Catiline, a fellow senator in the Roman Republic whom Cicero (as consul) had learned was plotting a coup, Cicero described him to the people of Rome as having one particular type of people around him—his special pleasure. They were the ones “you see with curled up and elegantly coiffed hair, either without beards or with exquisite beards, with tunics having sleeves that reach down to their ankles, clothed with veils [of a woman], not with togas [of a man]; the whole business and work of their lives comes to light in the dinners that go on until the break of dawn. All gamblers, all adulterers, all impure and immodest individuals associate in these flocks—these really pretty and delicate boys have learned not only to love and be loved, not only to sing and dance, but also to wield little curved daggers and to spread poisons . . .” Cicero, *Secunda Oratio in Catilinam*, II.10. (This is my translation). In 63 BC, Cicero clearly felt he could throw greater shame on Catiline by making it obvious his predilection for “boys” was an additional mark against his character. There are similar aspersions thrown at men who try to be like women in the early Christian writer, Clement of Alexandria. See his *Paidagogos*, III.3, 15-21.

<sup>68</sup> Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 117. As we shall see, Scroggs also applies this concept to the words used in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:10.

<sup>69</sup> Philo, *Special Laws*, III.37, trans. Colson, Loeb, 498.

2. οὐ τοῖς δρῶσι μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῖς πάσχουσιν | *ou tois drōsi monon, alla kai tois paschousin* (not only active and but also passive);
3. οἱ νόσον θήλειαν | *oi noson tēleian* (disease of effemination);
4. ὁ δε παιδεραστής | *ho de paiderastēs* (the lover as such);
5. ἀκρασίας καὶ μαλακίας | *akrasias kai malakias* (licentiousness and effeminacy);
6. τῆς καλῆν νεανιείαν | *tēs kalēn neanieian* (youthful beauty).<sup>70</sup>

It is important to note that Paul could have used any one of these six terms or phrases along with a number of others, but he did not—neither here in Romans 1:26-27 nor in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10.<sup>71</sup> While Paul and others in the first-century world could not have missed observing the sexual arrangements of adult males with teenage boys, there seems to be more occurring here in Romans 1 (at least) than pederasty. If pederasty was his point, why doesn't he say so? He had the words to do so. If pederasty was the sin against which he was speaking, why doesn't he address the exploitative nature of it or make it into a domination/subordination issue in sexuality? He does none of these.

Instead, there is a sense of *mutuality* in the description of sex here in Romans 1, especially in v. 27 when describing males who are “burned up with craving sexual lust *for each other*.”<sup>72</sup> Pederasty is frequently defined by its exploitative nature—the older male entering a sexual relationship with a younger male in exchange for various types of favor.<sup>73</sup> It seems to have been one in which the older partner, the *pederast*, received the greater benefits, and the younger partner, the “effeminate one,” received little.<sup>74</sup> While the opinions concerning pederasty among Romans and Greeks varied over time, it has a long history in both cultures.<sup>75</sup> While this may have been part of Paul's concern here in Romans 1, the fact that males are “in” each other and are “inflamed” with sexual desire for males points to something more reciprocal than exploitative. How can Scroggs and others be so certain that Paul had only pederasty in mind in Romans 1? Choosing to focus attention only on pederasty and thereby releasing current

<sup>70</sup> All six of these occur within a few paragraphs in *Special Laws*, III.37-41, Loeb, 498-500. See David E. Malick, “The Condemnation of Homosexuality in 1 Corinthians 6:9,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150 (Oct-Dec 1993): 479-92, here 485, fn28.

<sup>71</sup> The exception is *malakias*, which is close to Paul's word in 1 Cor 6:9 (μαλακοὶ | *malakoi*). We shall discuss this in greater depth below.

<sup>72</sup> Loader points out this aspect of mutuality as well—something that he notes Paul clearly had in his mind not “primarily exploitative pederasty and certainly not limited to it.” Loader, *The New Testament and Sexuality*, 325.

<sup>73</sup> Scroggs notes that the word used for the granting of sexual favor was the noun *charis*, which in Paul's language means God's grace to us in salvation. Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 36.

<sup>74</sup> In the Roman era at the end of the Republic and into the imperial age, Roman men could not engage in a pederastic relationship with *free-born citizens*. Such relationships had to be voluntary. However, men could do whatever they liked sexually with their slaves. Hence, slaves had no choice in the matter and had to endure much in this regard—the details of which I shall refrain from in this paper. There was also the hope that they might be “freed” from slavery if their masters delighted in them. It is quite easy to see how such pederasty could not by definition be about mutual reciprocity in the sexual act. My argument here is not denying the exploitative nature of ancient Greek and Roman pederasty, but rather denying that Paul's words in Romans 1:26-27 are tightly focused only on pederasty—as is a common argument among affirming Christians.

<sup>75</sup> It is impossible to summarize the variety of views on pederasty here among the ancient writers. The best approach is to read the various literature oneself. Helpful in this regard is *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of Basic Documents*, ed. Thomas K. Hubbard. Hubbard's introductory notes to the various time periods (from Archaic Greek Lyric to Later Greco-Roman Antiquity) results in a splendid example as to how each writer (or artist) took up a discussion of pederasty and either approved or disapproved. Therefore, it is difficult to say that there was unanimity in among the ancients on this issue—except for the Hellenistic Jews, who clearly offered extremely negative opinions.

homosexuals from the description of these activities as deserving the wrath of God seems to belie the preconceived notions of the interpreter rather than a fair assessment of what Paul was saying.

Moreover, could not “males with males” in Romans 1:27 apply to all same-sex actions instead of only the narrower focus of pederasty? A number of scholars have suggested that pederasty was *the* form of homosexuality in the first-century period.<sup>76</sup> Others have proposed that there was no such thing as mutual homoerotic love in the ancient world and therefore whatever Paul was speaking against, it could not have been homosexual relationships that are loving and committed to each other.<sup>77</sup> While the way the ancients understood sex may have been different from our modern notions of sexuality (we simply do not know for sure), there seems to be enough evidence that mutual loving same-sex relations existed in the ancient world.<sup>78</sup> Not all same-sex acts were exploitative pederasty. Although Paul’s precise understanding of same-sex relations may not be entirely a one-to-one connection with modern terms or concepts (especially from psychological and sociological perspectives), “it is not adequate simply to dismiss Paul’s stance because he does not share the premises of sexual ‘orientation’ that emerged in recent Western societies.”<sup>79</sup>

In addition, Paul expands the referred activity in verse 26 to lesbianism—something that is not part of the pederastic social relationships.<sup>80</sup> As Martti Nissinen notes, “The reference to women itself indicates that Paul’s criticism should not be restricted to pederasty, although it is definitely one of the phenomena in the background.”<sup>81</sup>

Neither distinguishing pederasty from relationships between adult, consenting males, nor distinguishing between active and passive partners as Roman culture was inclined to do, Paul simply follows the line of his Jewish cultural tradition by construing the entire realm of homosexual relations as evidence that divine wrath was active therein.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> In addition to Scroggs, Victor Furnish, *The Moral Teaching of Paul*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009); Herman C. Waetjen, “Same-Sex Sexual Relations in Antiquity and Sexuality and Sexual Identity in Contemporary American Society,” in *Biblical Ethics & Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996): 103-116; and Arland J. Hultgren, “Being Faithful to the Scriptures. Romans 1:26-27 as a Case in Point,” *Word & World* 14, no. 3 (Sum 1994): 315-325. These sources are offered in Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 347, fn4.

<sup>77</sup> This idea arises mainly from a 1978 text by Kenneth J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), who argues that homosexuality between partners of the same age was virtually unknown in the sources. Scroggs states essentially the same thing: “I know of no suggestions in the texts that homosexual relationships existed between same-age adults.” Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 35. This statement is made in the context where adult male prostitution is described.

<sup>78</sup> Thomas Hubbard consistently argues against the stream on this point, noting that “age-equal activity was not uncommon, as we have shown, profoundly undercuts any interpretation of Greek homosexuality in terms of ‘victim categories.’” See Hubbard, “Introduction,” in *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome*, 11.

<sup>79</sup> Robert Jewett, “The Social Context and Implications of Homoerotic References in Romans 1:24-27,” in *Homosexuality, Science, and the ‘Plain Sense’ of Scripture*, 244.

<sup>80</sup> Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 348.

<sup>81</sup> Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective*, trans. Kirsi Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 110. Some literature commonly uses “homoeroticism” instead of homosexuality and similar modern terms. Here is Nissinen’s definition of what he means by this term: homoeroticism means “all erotic-sexual encounters and experiences of people with persons of the same sex, whether the person is regarded as homosexual or not.” Nissinen, 17.

<sup>82</sup> Jewett, *Romans*, 179.

### **Challenge Three: It Was Not Homosexuality (as we know it today)**

In relation to the previously described approach regarding pederasty in Romans 1, some writers have pressed the idea that homosexuality was not really an English word before the mid-1800s and therefore the concept of homosexuality as we know it (related to same-sex orientation and a lifestyle) is only a little over 100 years old.<sup>83</sup> What does homosexuality mean for the ancient world? What could this word “homosexuality” mean for Paul—a term that does not occur in this way in the Bible?

Disagreement over whether the ancient Greeks and Romans understood sexual orientation, same-sex attraction, or even homosexuality as it has been understood in the last 100 years has arisen among historians and biblical scholars in the last 30 years. While “homosexual” was not a word in the ancient world, some scholars contend that the concepts related to same-sex sexual acts existed. We have seen several of them already in this paper. Others argue that the same-sex issues of the ancient world were so different from today’s understanding that even if Paul were prohibiting some sexual activities, they were *not* today’s homosexuality. James V. Brownson is representative of this challenge:

What Paul has in mind here is not the modern concept of homosexual orientation, that is, the notion that some people are not sexually attracted to those of the opposite sex at all, but instead are inclined to love those of the same sex. Such a perspective is found nowhere in the literature of Paul’s day. Instead, in that literature, whenever same-sex eroticism is viewed negatively, particularly in sources contemporaneous with Paul, it is regarded as a particular manifestation of self-centered lust, one that is not content with women alone but is driven to ever more exotic and unnatural forms of stimulation in the pursuit of pleasure.<sup>84</sup>

However, the question at hand is more sophisticated than finding or not finding the word “homosexual” in ancient vocabulary. The argument is essentially twofold: (1) did the ancients know of loving, same-sex relationships or same-sex orientations as we understand them today? and (2) if “homosexuality” as we understand it today did not exist in the ancient world, then Christians today can feel confident that *apparent* prohibitions of same-sex relations in Scripture refer to something other than loving, committed same-sex relations.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> See David M. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 15-17. Halperin traces the history of the word to two German doctors and then to an English translator, C. G. Chaddock, who coined the word “homo-sexuality” into English in 1892.

<sup>84</sup> Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, 155-56.

<sup>85</sup> I concede to the possibility that our modern notions of sexuality (in particular, homosexuality) do not belong in the reading of ancient texts (although removing oneself from the interpretive lenses of one’s culture and time is extraordinarily difficult). It may be possible that the ancients had no clue about orientation or same-sex relationships as we understand them today, namely, as the result of society’s construction of heterosexual and homosexual human beings. However, Brownson develops a rather biased approach to the reading of history on this point. As Branson Parler argues, Brownson has unsuccessfully demonstrated that there are no notions like the “modern” ones on sexual orientation. “The ancient world had no notion of sexual orientation,” says Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, 255. Parler, however, demonstrates that this is incorrect. Just to claim the ancient world has no *modern* conception of sexual orientation (or even homosexuality), does not mean there are no “equivalents to the modern conception of orientation in the ancient world.” See Branson Parler, “Worlds Apart?: James Brownson and the Sexual Diversity of the Greco-Roman World,” *Trinity Journal* 38 (2017): 183-200, here 187, fn15. Parler notes several Greek and Roman sources who point to something similar to modern understanding of orientation (e.g., “disposition”). Also, several ancient sources conjectured at the possibility of why some people were attracted to members of the same



As has been noted previously, several scholars have established the groundwork for engaging the first issue. In 1978, Kenneth Dover wrote that Greek homosexuality with partners of the same age is unknown in the ancient sources.<sup>86</sup> He later modified that claim in his second edition (1989), but the former idea has propelled a number of absolute statements among gay-affirming writers that try to propose the homosexuality of Paul's day could not be the same as homosexuality today. Further, David Halperin states that for Athenians, "sex was a manifestation of personal status," not manifestations of inward dispositions or inclinations.<sup>87</sup> For the Greeks, sex was a "non-relational" act.<sup>88</sup> In this light, how can people today think that our modern notions of same-sex orientation, for example, can possibly be something that Paul would have understood—or anyone in the Greco-Roman world for that matter?

With regard to the second issue, Robin Scroggs has made clear the conditions he thinks are necessary for using biblical statements as judgments against homosexuality. He states, "The context today must bear a reasonable similarity to the context which called the biblical statements into existence. Given the above, this means that only if the context which led to the creation of the New Testament judgments against homosexuality is similar to the context of the gay movement within Christianity today, can biblical injunctions be relevant in contemporary

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sex. The various answers are not important here, but the sense of clarity toward an inborn disposition toward these behaviors is. Brownson contends that as a Jew, Paul would not have agreed with those Greco-Roman sources that pointed to a natural inclination of same-sex desire (Brownson, 229). This is true. Paul would have viewed such inclinations (probably) as evil, resulting from the fall (although Brownson wants to argue strongly against that as well). Parler responds to Paul's disagreement with the non-Jewish sources with the astute observation that the Greeks and Romans attempted to understand same-sex desire/orientation by looking at the *experience of the phenomena* that existed among them—some people seemed permanently drawn to same-sex relations. The Jews, on the other hand, refused to explain the phenomena by their experience of it and instead based their biblical ethics for sex on the creation narrative and Leviticus. Nevertheless, "Brownson asserts that the modern concept of orientation and its persistence in 'some humans and some animals' should cause Christians to re-open the question of same-sex relationships" (Parler, 188). Further, Brownson suggests that we must get at *the underlying moral logic* of Paul's text and that, he says, points to these urges toward same-sex behavior as excess instead of moderation. This is what brings humans into same-sex relations for Paul—excess desire that moves one from heterosexual acts to same-sex acts (Brownson, 156). Therefore, Brownson argues that Paul cannot be speaking about homosexuality as we know it. The church can ignore the prohibitions in his writings because they must address something else. The evidence, however, does not fit with this claim. As Eva Cantarella notes, historians who view "good" and "bad" forms of homosexuality in Scripture and believe that Paul only condemns the bad forms (like exploitative pederasty), have taken a position that is "unacceptable," given the historical evidence. See Eva Cantarella, *Bisexuality in the Ancient World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 194. Moreover, whatever may be the truth of these interpretations of historical evidence and the conjectures that arise from them, Paul uses such a broad smattering of language that it appears much more inclusive than just pederasty or sexual relations that were not mutually reciprocal. Herman Waetjen speaks for many writers sharing Brownson's views: "Homosexuality and heterosexuality, therefore, are modern orientations that presuppose the sociocultural constructs of sexuality." Waetjen, "Same-Sex Relations in Antiquity," 112. In an enlightening discussion in her conclusion, Bernadette Brooten confronts several studies (Boswell and Scroggs in particular) with the evidence from the ancient world. "This material runs counter to John Boswell's view that premodern Christians accepted love and marriage between women. Further, the ancient sources, which rarely speak of sexual relations between women and girls, undermine Robin Scroggs's theory that Paul opposed homosexuality as pederasty" (Brooten, *Love between Women*, 361). While the ancient world may or may not have known of sexual orientation, same-sex attraction, same-sex desires, or whatever, the biblical admonitions (especially in Paul) seem to cover all manner of same-sex actions.

<sup>86</sup> Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*.

<sup>87</sup> Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, 32.

<sup>88</sup> Here Halperin is referring to the pederastic culture of classical Athens that shaped the definition and desire of sex so that despite these desires, the participants were engaged in activity between a "citizen and a non-citizen, between a person invested with full civil status and a statutory minor." Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, 32.

denominational discussions.”<sup>89</sup> Scroggs then moves to argue that the result of his writing to that point had shown “that in the Greco-Roman world there was one basic model of male homosexuality,” (by which he means pederasty).<sup>90</sup> Since the “majority of such relationships” in pederasty were “characterized by a lack of mutuality,” then we must conclude that Paul had this exploitative homosexual encounter in mind with its “dehumanizing dimensions.”<sup>91</sup> Therefore, whatever Paul said about same-sex relations in Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 6, he was not addressing the gay lifestyle or orientation of Christians in today’s world.<sup>92</sup>

### **Response to Challenge Three: It Was Same-Sex Relations**

Let us begin with Scroggs’ address of our second issue first, namely, that Paul did not address contemporary same-sex issues because he could not have known about them. It was pederasty not homosexuality that was the Greco-Roman way of same-sex relations. This is such a bold claim that Scroggs must offer an entire Appendix (A), “On the Question of Nonpederastic Male Homosexuality.” In this material, Scroggs offers evidence that may come against his major thesis (that the only model for male homosexuality was pederasty). He raises Plato’s discussion of same-sex love in the *Laws* (I.636c) and also Plutarch’s *Beasts are Rational* (990D).<sup>93</sup> There is sufficient evidence presented *against* Scroggs’ thesis in this appendix that one wonders why he wrote in the main text with such certainty that pederasty was “the *only* model of male homosexuality.”<sup>94</sup>

Were there homosexual relations in the ancient Greco-Roman world that did not fit within the confines of pederasty? Yes. Scroggs’ own Appendix A admits this. In one of the most extensive compilations to date on homosexuality in the Greco-Roman world, Thomas Hubbard gathers literary and artistic evidence regarding homosexuality. He notes that the perception among some scholars to assign age differentiation to pederasty as a social institution whereby the older partner is “active” in penetration and the younger partner is “passive” as a victim of penetration is not in line with the evidence: “...one finds little support for this interpretation in the textual evidence...”<sup>95</sup> To place homosexuality in ancient Greece and Rome within the confines of a power dynamics in pederasty is to overlook important facts in the record. “Indeed, the realization that age-equal activity was not uncommon, as we have shown, profoundly undercuts any interpretation of Greek homosexuality in terms of ‘victim categories.’”<sup>96</sup> In other words, there is a sufficient amount of evidence from the ancient world that points toward mutual same-sex love (not victimization) that the almost universal claim by gay-affirming Christians that Paul was addressing something other than homosexuality as we know it today is highly

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<sup>89</sup> Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 125.

<sup>90</sup> Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 126.

<sup>91</sup> Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 126.

<sup>92</sup> A related argument on Romans 1:26 is that the reference to females with females probably points to “unnatural heterosexual intercourse,” such as sexual acts to avoid pregnancy. Since discussion of and even prohibition of lesbian sexual acts is rare (e.g., only here in the whole Bible), then the practice concerning women that is condemned leans toward heterosexual acts that are unnatural. James E. Miller proposes this concept in “The Practices of Romans 1:26: Homosexual or Heterosexual?” *Novum Testamentum* 37, no. 1 (1995): 1-11, here 7-8.

<sup>93</sup> Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 131.

<sup>94</sup> Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 130.

<sup>95</sup> Thomas K. Hubbard, “Introduction,” *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of Basic Documents*, 10.

<sup>96</sup> Hubbard, “Introduction,” *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome*, 11.

suspect.<sup>97</sup> And this does not even begin to raise the issue of lesbianism in ancient Greece and Rome—something that pederasty does not (and cannot!) address. Clearly, Paul was speaking about something more than pederasty in Romans 1:26.<sup>98</sup>

Since there is not one ancient Greek or Latin word like “homosexuality” to cover the “same semantic range as the modern concept,” the term itself is “problematic when applied to ancient cultures.”<sup>99</sup> The acts themselves had commonly-used expressions that allow us a link from the past to the present. This is what I see in Paul’s writings—expressions that in their plain meaning can be easily transferred into today’s culture and setting. When females “exchange” the purpose of their sexual nature by lying with females, the expressions in that phrase depict something that is semantically understood in today’s world. When males “abandoned” their sexual nature by lying with males, the expressions are plainly evident in today’s world. To be sure, Paul may not have dealt with modern psychological issues of same-sex orientation or attraction or even with the thorny issue of genetic predisposition, but he did not have to address these modern conceptualizations in order to point to behavior that was out of line with the Creator’s intended way for humans to exist. One scholar, Bernadette Brooten, notes that there is evidence in the ancient world that one “category of persons” was viewed as having a “long-term or even lifelong homoerotic orientation.”<sup>100</sup> Paul may have been familiar with such same-sex relations—or perhaps not. We do know that as a Jew, he would have rejected any kind of homosexual relations or same-sex acts as inverting the state of nature at creation (male and female) and considered them “as flouting divine order.”<sup>101</sup>

As we conclude this section on Romans 1, the challenges against the traditional interpretation of this passage seem feeble at best. To be sure, there is important information gleaned about the ancient world in terms of a historical background to Paul’s life and thought, but there is no solid ground for Boswell to make a statement such as this: “The New Testament takes no demonstrable position on homosexuality.”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> By the early imperial period in Rome, Hubbard notes that some of the moralistic writers (especially against Nero’s flagrant homosexual behavior) indicate that some of them may have disdained homosexual behavior as part of their “ideological and moral position” (Hubbard, *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome*, 386). He continues, “In other words, homosexuality in this era may have ceased to be merely another practice of personal pleasure and began to be viewed as an essential and central category of personal identity, exclusive of and antithetical to heterosexual orientation” (Ibid.). This is an amazing assessment—and it is concerning a period that is contemporaneous with Paul. While not claiming direct one-on-one connection between the ideological views of early imperial Rome and today, one cannot help but hear the similarities of terms as well as concepts in this evaluation.

<sup>98</sup> Note the comment by Gordon Fee on 1 Corinthians: “The very fact that Paul includes women in Rom. 1:26 tells against Scroggs’s whole reconstruction of the matter.” See Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, rev. ed., ed. F. F. Bruce and Gordon Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 268, fn242.

<sup>99</sup> Hubbard, “Introduction,” *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome*, 1.

<sup>100</sup> Bernadette Brooten, *Love Between Women*, 8-9.

<sup>101</sup> Loader, *The New Testament and Sexuality*, 324.

<sup>102</sup> Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 117. There are two aspects under the umbrella of today’s usage of the word “homosexual.” Among some Christians, individuals with an inclination toward same-sex relations chose not to act on those desires, thereby keeping their passions in check; most Christians view this as temptation that must be regulated by self-control (which is also true for heterosexual Christians). The other aspect under this umbrella is same-sex sexual acts that act on those desires. However Christians may describe the first aspect (inclination toward same-sex as an orientation or temptation to be controlled) and the second aspect (acting out on those desires), it seems that Paul places his judgment in Romans 1 on those individuals who *act* on their inordinate desires. Some Christians who feel they have desire for same-sex relations purposefully refrain from

## 1 Corinthians 6:9-10

“Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, **nor effeminate, nor homosexuals,** nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God.” (1 Cor 6:9-10 NASB; my emphasis).

Again in this passage, we shall follow the previous pattern:

- 1) context of the passage;
- 2) text of the passage;
- 3) the challenge to the traditional understanding of the passage;
- 4) a response to the challenges.

### Context of 1 Corinthians 6:9-10

The words in question for this passage are translated as “effeminate” and “homosexuals” by the NASB, or in the NIV placed in one phrase: “men who have sex with men.” The two Greek words are μαλακοὶ | *malakoi* and ἀρσενοκοῖται | *arsenokoitai*. While we shall consider why these two words have been so difficult to translate into English below, for now we must consider what Paul is doing in this section of 1 Corinthians 6.

From 1 Corinthians 5:1 – 6:20, Paul deals with several sexual issues that have arisen in this congregation with whom he lived and worked for 18 months. The first discussion in 5:1-8 relates to sexual immorality (πορνεία | *porneia*) “of a kind that even pagans do not tolerate: A man sleeping with his father’s wife” (1 Cor 5:1 NIV). Then in 5:9-13, Paul continues with issues related to sexual immorality, offering instructions to associate with *unbelievers* who are sexually immoral (πόρνοις | *pornois*) but not with those who claim to be part of God’s family and are “sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler” (1 Cor 5:11 NIV). Instead, the church is to “expel the wicked person from among you,” which is a command harkening back to the Law (Deut 13:5; 17:7; 19:19; 21:21; 22:21, 24; and 24:7).

Beginning with 1 Corinthians 6:1, Paul addresses how to settle disputes with each other and whether to take such disagreements to the law court instead of the church. It is in this section that our passage of “vice list” occurs. Why should lawsuits occur between Corinthian Christians in the church? “Why not rather be wronged (ἀδικεῖσθε | *adikeisthe*)?”<sup>103</sup> Why not rather be cheated (ἀποστερεῖσθε | *apostereisthe*)?”<sup>104</sup> (1 Cor 6:7 NIV). Then in verse 8, Paul hones the message directly to the Corinthian believers: “Instead, you yourselves cheat (ἀποστερεῖτε | *apostereite*) and do wrong (ἀδικεῖτε | *adikeite*),<sup>105</sup> and you do this to brothers and sisters” (1 Cor 6:8 NIV).

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acting on those desires out of obedience to God’s plan. Paul does not seem to have such Christians who may be struggling with temptation in mind here in Romans 1.

<sup>103</sup> This first verb (ἀδικεῖσθε | *adikeisthe*) can mean “do wrong, be unjust, to injure or hurt.” It is a Present Passive Indicative: why not rather “be wronged” or “be injured” or “experience injustice.”

<sup>104</sup> The second verb here (ἀποστερεῖσθε | *apostereisthe*) can mean “to defraud, deprive, or rob.” It is a Present Passive Indicative also: why not rather “be defrauded, be deprived, be robbed?”

<sup>105</sup> These two verbs are exactly the same verbs in the previous line except in this sentence they are in the *active* voice. This means that the Corinthians *are doing* these things, not *having them done to* them. Christians are injuring, doing wrong or being unjust to other Christians; Christians are cheating, defrauding, depriving or robbing other Christians. (Unfortunately, the NIV reverses the order in the second line. In Greek, “do wrong” comes first and

At this point, our passage begins: “Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God?” (1 Cor 6:9a NIV). Paul shifts from charging the Corinthians of wrongdoing and defrauding other believers to a reminder that such action robs them of the inheritance of the saints. The word “wrongdoers” (ἄδικοι | *adikoi*) takes up the phrases from the previous verse. People who make it a practice of harming and doing injury and injustice to fellow Christians will not inherit the kingdom of God. Then Paul flows rather naturally into a vice list of ten groups of people and/or behaviors that will not inherit God’s kingdom:

- 1. sexually immoral (πόρνοι | *pornoi*)**
- 2. idolaters (εἰδωλολάτραι | *eidōlōlatrai*)**
3. adulterers (μοιχοὶ | *moichoî*)
4. *malakoi* (μαλακοὶ | *malakoi*)
5. *arsenokoitai* (ἀρσενοκοῖται | *arsenokoitai*)<sup>106</sup>
6. thieves (κλέπται | *kleptai*)
- 7. greedy (πλεονέκται | *pleonektai*)**
- 8. drunkards (μέθυσοι | *methusoi*)**
- 9. slanderers (λοιδοροὶ | *loidoroi*)**
- 10. swindlers (ἄρπαγες | *harpages*)**

In 1 Corinthians 5:11, Paul had used several of these terms already, reminding the Corinthians not to associate with believers who act in these ways. I have placed the six he had previewed there in bold above. The order in 1 Corinthians 5:11 is different and each of the persons doing the activity is in the singular, not the plural as here in 6:9-10:

1. sexually immoral
2. greedy
3. idolater
4. slanderer
5. drunkard
6. swindler

Here in 1 Corinthians 6 he extends the list, adding four new terms: adulterers, *malakoi*, *arsenokoitai*, and thieves. The grouping of the first three seems significant in that they feel connected by similar activities of a sexually immoral nature. “Thieves” is perhaps a general summary word for those who defraud and rob others.

How does this list propel Paul’s argument here? It is found in the surprising statement that concludes with verse 11: “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 and by the Spirit of our God” (NIV). Some among the Corinthian church had been these in their pre-conversion days. Why do they seem to be returning to those days ruled by the old nature? They are now washed and cleaned up by God. They must live like it.

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“cheat” comes second, matching the previous line that was in the passive voice (rather “be wronged” and “be cheated”), so that the very next line in the active voice is shocking: instead you all are *doing wrong* to other believers and *are cheating* them.

<sup>106</sup> I have left the two words of our focus in transliterated form in Greek so that we can work through their meaning more carefully below.

Then Paul moves forward into several paragraphs that engage an almost philosophical discussion about sexual immorality and the body (1 Cor 6:12-20). “The body is not meant for sexual immorality (δὲ σῶμα οὐ τῆ πορνεία | *de sōma ou tē porneia*) but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body” (1 Cor 6:13b NIV). Paul seems to be maneuvering between the physical body and the fact that each believer is a member of Christ’s body. “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never!” (1 Cor 6:15 NIV). Paul reminds the Corinthians (and us!) in rather stark terms that what we do individually with our physical bodies has ramifications for the spiritual body of Christ. Therefore, “Flee from sexual immorality...” (1 Cor 6:18 NIV). Since our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit,<sup>107</sup> we are no longer “our own,” but “were bought with a price” (1 Cor 6:19-20 NIV).

In this entire segment, Paul has offered the Corinthians a clear instruction for the community of faith. There are certain behaviors within the body of Christ that are defiling to the whole. Some of these are acts of injustice or harm to other believers (or presumably, anyone); others are acts of sexual immorality (the general term, *porneia*), which defile not only individual believers when they act in such ways, but taint the very body of Christ. Paul reminds his congregation that we are better than that because we have new life in Christ, and we have the Spirit of God in us. With the clear resonance of the Levitical Holiness Code, the new community of faith also has a holiness code to which it must strive.<sup>108</sup>

That is the logic behind his demand that the Corinthian church expel the man engaged in a sexual relationship with his stepmother (5:1-13). A similar logic would certainly apply, within Paul’s frame of reference, to the *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* of 1 Corinthians 6:9. The community of those who have been washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ ought to have put such behaviors behind it. The New Testament never considers sexual conduct a matter of purely private concern between consenting adults. According to Paul, everything that we do as Christians, including our sexual practices, affects the whole body of Christ.<sup>109</sup>

### **Text of 1 Corinthians 6:9-10**

In this vice list, Paul places two words next to each other. They are two words of which we today are rather uncertain for their meaning, so we will need to work with care when defining each of them. The first word, μαλακοί | *malakoi*, is a general term essentially meaning “soft”<sup>110</sup> or in this case, “the soft ones.”<sup>111</sup> In a sexual context, the ancient world used *malakoi* to refer to an “effeminate man” or to the passive partner in a same-sex act (which would include pederasty

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<sup>107</sup> The NIV chooses to render this phrase “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit,” making both “bodies” and “temples” plural. In Greek, both are singular; hence I have rendered it so in the text above. What the significance of this difference may mean is unclear, but I think Gordon Fee offers the best possibility. It is a Semitic (Hebraic) linguistic preference for a “distributive singular” where something belongs to each person in a group (here “body”) is put in the singular. See Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 292, fn337.

<sup>108</sup> Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 391-92.

<sup>109</sup> Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 392.

<sup>110</sup> Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 62.

<sup>111</sup> Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 307.

as we have described it above).<sup>112</sup> Since the first term (*malakoi*) has such broad semantic range of meaning, I will start with a consideration of the second term, ἀρσενokoῖται | *arsenokoitai*, since clarity on its meaning will help to put *malakoi* in context.

This term, ἀρσενokoῖται | *arsenokoitai*, appears nowhere in Greek literature before Paul. In other words, 1 Corinthians 6:9 is the first time that this word shows up in the vast literature of the ancient Greek world. This has led to some of the difficulty in interpreting what Paul meant with this term.<sup>113</sup> It occurs later in 1 Timothy 1:10 and in other extrabiblical documents *after* Paul, but not before. What could it mean?

Let's turn to etymology—the parts of the word that can give us some sense of the term. The first part (ἀρσεν— | *arsen*—) refers to “male”—a stem that we have seen before in our discussion.<sup>114</sup> The second part of the noun (κοῖται | *koitai*) refers to “bed” or “the act of lying.”<sup>115</sup> When it is made into a compound noun as here, the suffix points to the doer of such an action. So, the most direct etymological understanding is “one who beds males.”<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 268, esp. fn241. Here, Boswell offers a strained interpretation of *malakoi*, pointing toward Aristotle's “wanting in self-control,” and the result of this in medieval understanding to the twentieth century. Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 106-07.

<sup>113</sup> For several arguments on this, see Cristina Richie, “An Argument against the Use of the Word ‘Homosexual’ in English Translation of the Bible,” *The Heythrop Journal* 51 (2010): 723-29. Her conclusion is that these words refer directly to pederasty and thus *malakoi* should be translated with “catamite,” while *arsenokoitai* with “pederast.” See Richie, 728. Also, see Simon Hedlund, “Who Are the ἀρσενokoῖται, and Why Does Paul Condemn Them (1 Cor 6:9)?” *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok* 82 (2017): 116-53. Hedlund notes the difficulty of being anachronistic with our terminology such as “homosexual” or “effeminate.” What effeminacy meant to the ancient world might have been quite different from our conceptualization of it today (117, fn2). Hedlund argues that whatever may be the best translation for these two terms, they must convey “1) the emotional impact of the polarizing between those who approved and those who disapproved of male same-sex sexual acts, and 2) the close connection between power, abuse, and sex” (133). However, he later concludes that it “seems quite clear by now that Paul aimed to condemn all forms of male same-sex sexual acts and all of its participants” (145). Paul held social strata concerns, especially for those who owned slaves and the slaves themselves in the local congregation. One should not use the power over a slave's body for sexual satisfaction, thereby demeaning the slave's personhood and value as a fellow Christian. On the other hand, Christians who were slaves should not use sexual favors to climb the social ladder. When men had sex with men, says Hedlund, Paul condemned them (147). Hedlund concludes that a translation like “men who have socially abusive sex with men” is preferred over the more general “men who have sex with men” (151). Here I think Hedlund has placed too much weight on the Greco-Roman context in which Corinth operated and not enough weight on Paul's own Jewish background. I remain unconvinced that the social strata issues in Corinth for which Hedlund argues are substantially behind this sexual term. There is more here than just activity that is “sexually abusive,” especially if Leviticus is somewhere in Paul's mind when crafting this term.

<sup>114</sup> In some documents after Paul, the ἀρσεν— | *arsen*—stem appears as ἀρρεν— | *arren*—. These appear to be basically interchangeable.

<sup>115</sup> Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 314, fn102 and 315.

<sup>116</sup> Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 315. The most thorough investigation of etymology for *arsenokoitai* to date is found in David Wright, “Homosexuals or Prostitutes?” esp. 129-30. Both Gagnon and Wright argue convincingly against others (esp. Boswell) that the combination of these stems makes the first term (male) the *object* of the more verbal suffix (bedding). Hence, these are men (masculine plural ending) who take other men to bed, undoubtedly here for the purpose of sexual intercourse. Dale Martin has claimed that etymology of the two parts of the compound word is “linguistically invalid.” Instead, one should “analyze its use in as many different contexts as possible” [Dale B. Martin, “*Arsenokoitēs* and *Malakos*: Meanings and Consequences,” in *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality*, ed. Robert Brawley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 117-36, here 119.]. However, the difficulty in Martin's proposal is that there are so few contemporary contexts in which this word exists to offer conclusive opinions on its meaning. There is more benefit to etymology than Martin seems willing to allow. Also, to narrow the meaning to some monetary exploitation related to sexuality is conjecture. Martin misses the role of Jewish writers and thinkers on Paul's composition of words.

From where might Paul have come up with this term? It seems quite reasonable to consider the source the Levitical code in the Septuagint translation from Hebrew. Here is how the relevant passages read in Greek with a translation.<sup>117</sup> Notice the underlined words particularly:

“And you shall not lie with a male as with a woman”  
(καὶ μετὰ ἄρσενος οὐ κοιμηθήσῃ κοίτην γυναικείαν |  
*kai meta arsenos ou koimēthēsē koitēn gynaikeian*).  
[Lev 18:22]

“And whoever shall lie with a male as with a woman,  
they have both done an abomination. Let them die—they  
are both guilty.”  
(καὶ ὅς ἄν κοιμηθῇ μετὰ ἄρσενος κοίτην γυναικός,  
βδέλυγμα ἐποίησαν ἀμφοτέροι. Θανάτῳ θανατούσθωσαν  
ἔνοχοι εἰσιν. | *kai hos an koimēthē meta arsenos koitēn gynaikos,*  
*bdelugma epoisan amphoteroi. Thanatō thanatousthōsan*  
*enochoi eisin*).  
[Lev 20:13]

Notice that the two stems (the underlined words above) for ἀρσενοκοῖται | *arsenokoitai* are here—and in one case, side by side (*arsen*— and *koitē*—). It seems most reasonable to see this newly crafted word as recalling the terms from Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13—lying down with males as with a woman.<sup>118</sup> Hence, Paul seems to have the Levitical holiness code in his mind writing the Corinthians.<sup>119</sup> Death of both participants was the penalty in the former covenant for

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<sup>117</sup>The Septuagint (abbreviated LXX) was a translation of the Hebrew Bible to Greek, completed around 175 BC. It was *the* Bible of the New Testament church in the first century for both Jewish and Gentile Christians.

<sup>118</sup> As Simon Hedlund notes, “why use an unknown word when addressing people about something that is serious enough to cost a person their heavenly inheritance?” Hedlund, “Who are the ἀρσενοκοῖται?” 149. It seems obvious to me that he expected at least some in the congregation to make the connection with Leviticus 18 and 20 with his new word—or figure out the meaning of the word from its two parts, “bedding” and “males.”

<sup>119</sup> In recent years, Idan Dershowitz, a professor of Judaism in Potsdam, Germany, has proposed that the Holiness Code of Leviticus 18 and 20 reflects the later insertions of editors (redactors) who compiled the book of Leviticus from various older manuscripts. Part of this thesis rests on the assumption that the underlying manuscript could be something like that found in 1883 where 15 manuscript fragments were discovered near the Dead Sea in a cave (near the area, supposedly, where the legitimate Dead Sea Scrolls were found in 1947). Written on leather was paleo-Hebrew script, part of which covered Leviticus 18 and/or 20. In 1883, several experts examined the fragments and declared them fakes that were set up for sale by Moses Shapira. Drawings of these documents survive (not photographs, to my knowledge), but the documents themselves have disappeared (hence, no Carbon-14 dating is possible to determine their age). However, Prof. Dershowitz believes these documents may be authentic, bringing to us a manuscript dated in the 700s or so BC—a full 500-600 years older than any biblical manuscript we currently possess. Writing in the *New York Times*, Jennifer Schuessler reports, “In a 2018 scholarly article, [Dershowitz] used a similar approach to advance a startling claim: that an earlier version of Leviticus, rather than forbidding sex between men, had actually permitted it.” (Schuessler, “Is a Long-Dismissed Forgery Actually the Oldest Known Biblical Manuscript?” *New York Times* (10 March 2021). Dershowitz predates his proposal on the method he established in his dissertation, namely, that editors of the Bible “cut and pasted” (literally) parts of the Bible together from earlier versions. Aligned with this idea, Dershowitz viewed the leather manuscript from Leviticus as being different in wording with the text we have today, thereby probably pre-dating the editorial cutting and pasting. In that text, he argues, there is no prohibition against same-sex acts. Indeed, he proposes evidence that *supports* same-sex acts. This is *highly* theoretical and is not yet received across the scholarly world. I have raised it here as an example of the gay-affirming agenda to remove the offensive nature of same-sex prohibition from Scripture. See



such behavior and the threat of disinheritance of the kingdom of God was the penalty due to those in the new covenant who live in the ways outlined here.

Another source for Paul's term could come from Palestinian Judaism and rabbinic sources. Scroggs notes that there was no Hebrew word for "homosexual" as we use today in English, but the rabbis had developed a short-hand for the phrasing of Lev 18:22 and 20:13. They took the verbal phrase "lies with a male," and made two phrases: *mishkav zakur* (lying of a male) or *mishkav b<sup>e</sup>zakur* (lying with a male).<sup>120</sup> Given Paul's education in some of the rabbinic tradition, it seems feasible that these Jewish phrases may be behind Paul's creation of the word ἀρσενοκοῖται | *arsenokoitai*.

Now to return to the meaning of the first word, *malakoi*. It seems most probable to see the second term (ἀρσενοκοῖται | *arsenokoitai*) as the *active* participant in homosexual activity while the first phrase (*malakoi*) could then be translated "the one who is the passive recipient in the homosexual activity."<sup>121</sup> Both of these will not inherit the kingdom of God. In following the instruction that Paul posed previously in 1 Corinthians 5:9-11 where unbelievers were handled differently from believers who exhibited the same behavior (sexually immoral or greedy, idolater or slanderer, drunkard or swindler), I see something parallel at the conclusion of this passage. Some of the Corinthians *were* precisely the people in the list for whom the inheritance of God's kingdom was nowhere in sight. Some *were* sexually immoral, *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*. But now they are cleansed from those sins and are transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. Precisely due to that salvific transference, these people must no longer live as if that life-transforming event never occurred—as if they still were slaves to their old natures and way of living. They are to associate with unbelievers, but they are not to live like them. On the contrary, if anyone does start to live as if their past is more defining of their person and actions than their present status as a temple in which the Spirit dwells, then the church is not to dine with them in any association by which the believer or the church might gain the impression that such activities were without penalty in God's kingdom. For the sake of the congregation—the community of brothers and sisters in Christ—"Expel the wicked person (πονηρὸν | *ponēron*) from among you" (1 Cor 5:13).

### **Challenge One: Malakoi—Softies? Effeminate Men? Call-boys?**

As we have seen above, *malakoi* has created some difficulty when translating out of this context (and even some challenges when inside this context). First, Robin Scroggs suggests that "effeminate call-boys" is the best way to translate μαλακοί | *malakoi*, giving it a semantic range

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Idan Dershowitz, "Revealing Nakedness and Concealing Homosexual Intercourse: Legal and Lexical Evaluation in Leviticus 18," *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 6, no. 4 (2017): 510-26. In response to Dershowitz's proposal, see George M. Hollenback, "Was There Ever an Implicit Acceptance of Male Homosexual Intercourse in Leviticus 18?" *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 131, no. 3 (2019): 464-66. See Dershowitz's response to Hollenback: Dershowitz, "Response to 'Was There Ever an Implicit Acceptance of Male Homosexual Intercourse in Leviticus 18?' by George M. Hollenback in ZAW 131/3 (2019), 464-466," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 131, no 4 (2019): 625-28.

<sup>120</sup> Scroggs, *The New Testament and Sexuality*, 83.

<sup>121</sup> See Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 309-12 for an extended discussion of the feasibility of such a translation without necessarily referring to male prostitution or pederasty.

in the arena of pederasty or male prostitution.<sup>122</sup> The *malakoi* for Scroggs is pointing out “the youth who consciously imitated feminine styles and ways and who walked the thin line between passive homosexual activity for pleasure and that for pay.”<sup>123</sup>

In a second proposal, New Testament scholar Dale Martin argues that the term *malakoi* should be translated more broadly—simply “the effeminate.”<sup>124</sup> In the ancient world, this word can point to people who are fond of “soft things,” like clothing or people who pay lots of attention to grooming. It can refer to people with long hair, excessively perfumed and overly made-up.<sup>125</sup> Martin believes the term is demeaning to women since feminine traits are considered inferior when “tried on” by men. Such misogyny (hatred of women) should not be supported by Christians. The conclusion for Martin, then, is that interpreters of the text for today should no longer appeal to what the Bible says in 1 Corinthians 6:9.<sup>126</sup>

Finally, there are numerous other proposals that differ in their specific approaches but end up attempting to remove the potential “sting” from Paul’s charge here. For example, Boswell states that this word refers to moral weakness and has “no specific connection to homosexuality.”<sup>127</sup> Boswell argues that there is no natural connection from *malakos* to gay people, but instead many different kinds of people were called *malakoi*. Another book early in the discussion, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor*, suggests that *malakoi* refers to “self-indulgent” people, particularly heterosexuals who are focused on sexual conquest.<sup>128</sup> Similarly, in this context David Fredrickson sees *malakoi* pointing to persons who lack self-control.<sup>129</sup>

### **Response to Challenge One: *Malokai*—Recipients of Same-sex Sexual Acts**

It is not a matter of debate that when  $\mu\alpha\lambda\alpha\kappa\acute{o}\iota$  | *malakoi* is used by itself in the ancient world, a variety of possible meanings entail. Even among the references in the New Testament, this is the only place where translators have tended to give it a sexual coloring. However, as we have pointed out earlier, the *context* of this passage makes the meaning at least reasonably clearer. The second term ( $\acute{\alpha}\rho\sigma\epsilon\nu\omicron\kappa\omicron\iota\tau\alpha\iota$  | *arsenokoitai*) helps to clarify the potential semantic range of meaning in the first term ( $\mu\alpha\lambda\alpha\kappa\acute{o}\iota$  | *malakoi*).<sup>130</sup>

Also helpful in the context is the fact that the end result is not a matter of “taste” or preferential styles of wearing clothes or hair. The resultant behavior of the  $\mu\alpha\lambda\alpha\kappa\acute{o}\iota$  | *malakoi* is not being welcomed into the kingdom of God. Surely Paul would not have left his readers wondering what he meant if the results were so consequential. It is true that  $\mu\alpha\lambda\alpha\kappa\acute{o}\iota$  | *malakoi* could have a number of nuances and definitions according to the individual author in the ancient

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<sup>122</sup> Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 106; James Brownson offers the same claim regarding *malakoi* as the passive partner or *erōmenoi* and *arsenokoitai* as the active partner or *erastai*. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, 274.

<sup>123</sup> Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 106.

<sup>124</sup> Dale B. Martin, “*Arsenokoitēs* and *Malakos*: Meanings and Consequences,” 128.

<sup>125</sup> Martin, “*Arsenokoitēs* and *Malakos*,” 126-31.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid. Also, see Gagnon’s discussion of this in *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 307, esp. fn93.

<sup>127</sup> Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 340.

<sup>128</sup> Scanzoni and Mollenkott, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor*, 68-9. (See fn2 above for the full reference).

<sup>129</sup> David E. Fredrickson, “Natural and Unnatural Use in Romans 1:24-27: Paul and the Critique of *eros*,” in *Homosexuality, Science and the ‘Plain Sense’ of Scripture*, ed. David L. Balch (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 197-222, here 220.

<sup>130</sup> Loader states *malakoi* cannot be considered apart from *arsenokoitai*. Loader, *The New Testament and Sexuality*, 329.

world, but when found in this list of acts that merit eternal consequence, the apparent vice seems connected to sexual activity. Here is where we have headed all along. The second term helps to clarify the first—and probably would have done so for the Corinthian community.

Scroggs' attempt to press μαλακοί | *malakoi* into service for male prostitution—either the system of pederasty or the “effeminate call-boys”—may have some truth to it. However, to limit it only to “youth,” as he does, and to make it *only* applicable to pederasty schemes or prostitution, as he does, distances it from the general nature of the word in sexual intercourse. Martin does something similar by focusing μαλακοί | *malakoi* on “the effeminate ones,” thereby coloring it with anti-feminine ideas that would be deemed misogynistic in the contemporary world.<sup>131</sup> Gagnon summarizes the problem of these two proposals quite well: “Both Scroggs and Martin seek to render the word *malakoi* unusable for those who regard all homosexual behavior as sin: Scroggs by showing the word is too narrow to embrace non-prostituting passive homosexual males; Martin by demonstrating that the word is too broad to be taken seriously today, embracing as it does not only passive homosexual males but also any heterosexual males who display effeminacy.”<sup>132</sup>

Finally, does it have no connection to homosexuality whatsoever, as Boswell contends? Is it simply to be rendered “morally weak,” or “self-indulgent” or even “lacking self-control?” We need not spend much time on these proposals. It is clear that Paul else used Greek vocabulary with precisely these meanings. He did not use them here. The context requires a sexual understanding of this noun—men who behave in the passive (effeminate) way of reception in the sexual act with other men.

### **Challenge Two: arsenokoitai—not homosexuals at all**

In the discussion above, we chose to define ἀρσενοκοῖται | *arsenokoitai* (Paul's “neologism”) as “males bedding males” in line with Leviticus 18 and 20, especially the Septuagint's rendering of these two terms in Greek. It has been my contention that this word does not need to be confined to male prostitution—although such activities were undoubtedly a subset of homoerotic behaviors within this term for Paul.

John Boswell has argued that the word ἀρσενοκοῖται | *arsenokoitai* “a male having intercourse,” would point to a male prostitute who “services” both men and women.<sup>133</sup> David Wright has demonstrated that Boswell's translation rests on faulty understanding of the Greek etymology with compound nouns.<sup>134</sup>

Robin Scroggs proposes that ἀρσενοκοῖται | *arsenokoitai* (here and in 1 Tim 1:10) refers to “the active partner who keeps the *malakos* as a ‘mistress’ or who hires him on occasion to satisfy his sexual desires.”<sup>135</sup> For Scroggs, this seems in line with the idea of pederasty or even

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<sup>131</sup> Martin, “*Arsenokoitēs* and *Malakos*,” 127-28.

<sup>132</sup> Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 307.

<sup>133</sup> The basis of Boswell's argument is taking the first term of this compound word (*arsen*—) as the subject instead of the object of the bedding. Hence, this is a male who takes others (males and females) to bed. David Wright has demonstrated clearly that such a reversal of *arsen*— from object of the bedding to subject of the bedding is not appropriate to the way the word is pieced together. He also points to the fact that so many other compound nouns operate the reverse manner (the way we have translated it thus far, with “males” being the object of the verbal aspect *koite*—). See David F. Wright, “Homosexuals or Prostitutes?” 129-30.

<sup>134</sup> Wright, “Homosexuals or Prostitutes?” 129-131.

<sup>135</sup> Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 108.

male prostitution. Consequently, the “words cannot be said to point to or exclude the general practice of homosexuality from the kingdom of God.”<sup>136</sup>

One further challenge to traditional interpretation of this passage will suffice. Martti Nissinen had argued that this term ἀρσενοκοῖται | *arsenokoitai* refers only to exploitative sex—something that is entirely different from the modern concept of homosexuality. Therefore, one should never use 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 or 1 Timothy 1:10 to threaten people with eternal damnation. Such would be a “cruel abuse of religious power.”<sup>137</sup> Further, he underscores the difference between Paul’s charge and today’s homosexuality:

The modern concept of ‘homosexuality’ should by no means be read into Paul’s text, nor can we assume that Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 6:9 ‘condemn all homosexual relations’ in all times and places and ways... Regardless of the kind of sexuality meant in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10, in their current contexts they are examples of the exploitation of persons . . . What Paul primarily opposes is the wrong that people do to others.<sup>138</sup>

### **Response to Challenge Two: *arsenokoitai*—males who bed males**

Against John Boswell’s understanding of ἀρσενοκοῖται | *arsenokoitai* as “active male prostitutes,”<sup>139</sup> it is enough to say that Boswell’s interpretation of the word itself goes against the grain of scholarship in this area (as David Wright has sufficiently demonstrated).<sup>140</sup>

Against Scroggs’ proposal that it means the active partner who keeps the effeminate one as mistress or pays for sex to satisfy his desires on occasion, the literature and even the artwork of ancient Greece and Rome do not justify this narrow claim. Scroggs thinks this word only refers (along with *malakoi*) to “a very specific dimension of pederasty,” which Paul condemns.<sup>141</sup> Scroggs assumes that pederasty is the only form of same-sex relationships that Paul could have known in his world. Thomas Hubbard notes clearly that the evidence does not support this claim. “Greek homosexual activity, despite popular misconceptions, was not restricted to man-boy pairs. Vase-painting shows numerous scenes where there is little or no apparent difference in age between the young wooer and his object of courtship.”<sup>142</sup> Further, if Paul had wanted to address pederasty or even male prostitution, there were clear expressions in

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<sup>136</sup> Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 109. It should be noted that here Scroggs was speaking of both ἀρσενοκοῖται | *arsenokoitai* and μαλακοί | *malakoi*.

<sup>137</sup> Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, 125.

<sup>138</sup> Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, 118. Also quoted in Gagnon, 324-25.

<sup>139</sup> Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 344.

<sup>140</sup> Even Robin Scroggs thinks he is wrong on this. Scroggs, 107.

<sup>141</sup> Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 108.

<sup>142</sup> Hubbard, *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome*, 5. Craig Williams notes that in Rome, “some Romans did participate in formal wedding ceremonies in which one male was married to another. . . and that these men considered themselves joined as spouses. But it is equally clear that such marriages were, by traditional Roman standards, anomalous. . . .” Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 286. We might note that Nero was described by Suetonius, the historian, as involved in same-sex relations, “castrating two of his freedmen, Sporos and Doryphorus, to make transsexuals of them. He married them both and publicly led them about as his wives” (see Suetonius, *Vit. Caes.* 6.28-29). The summary quote is from William Simmons, *Peoples of the New Testament World: An Illustrated Guide* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 235.

Koine Greek for doing so: παιδεραστής | *paidērastēs* or παιδοφιλής | *paidophilēs*.<sup>143</sup> Instead, he crafted a new word (perhaps) that reflects a male lying with a male, reminiscent of Leviticus and Jewish tradition.

Since a trend in Greek literature of Paul's day was to condemn exploitative forms of pederasty, surely, reasons Scroggs, this must be the only same-sex act that is in view here. Undoubtedly, this is an overreach.<sup>144</sup> Some scholars who affirm same-sex relations today have found it difficult to believe Paul only had pederasty or some type of "call-boy" prostitution in mind. Bernadette Brooten has noted that in the ancient world of Greece and Rome, same-sex relations with women (lesbianism) was known in a mutual form of exchanging love, not in some pederastic exploitation as found among adult males and boys.<sup>145</sup> Brooten states, "I see Paul as condemning all forms of homoeroticism."<sup>146</sup> To limit *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* either to pederasty or male prostitution (as Scroggs does) is based on an assumption that "these were the only forms of homosexual practice that Paul knew of and consequently the only forms of homosexuality that he condemned."<sup>147</sup> As we have seen, this assumption is tenuous at best. When one moves to understand Judaism both in earlier times and in times contemporary with Paul, there is clear opposition to all forms of same-sex intercourse.<sup>148</sup>

Finally, with Nissinen's proposal, we may conflate the conclusions of a number of writers who find reason to side-step a plain-sense interpretation of these passages. It is part of an argument we saw earlier in this paper, namely, that the homosexuality of today cannot be anything like the homosexuality of the ancient world—if we can even use the same term to describe both worlds. Nissinen and others state that the real problem that Paul opposes in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 is exploitation—doing harm to another human being. I submit that Paul poses that general admonition in 1 Corinthians 6:8: "Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers and sisters" (NIV). Here are the general terms that receive much more illustration from the vice list in verses 9-10. Wrongdoers will not receive the kingdom of God. What kind of wrongdoers? Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor **men who behave like women in the receptive position in same-sex sexual acts nor men who bed males in the way one lies with a woman**,<sup>149</sup> nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. If this passage (that warns of not inheriting the kingdom of God) is *not* to be understood as condemning all homosexual acts in all times and places (as Nissinen says), then what would be such a statement?

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<sup>143</sup> Reidar Hvalvik, "The Present Context in the Light of the New Testament and Its Background: The Case of Homosexuality," *European Journal of Theology* 24, no. 2 (2015): 146-159, here 153.

<sup>144</sup> Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 313, fn101. Gagnon notes that the Greco-Roman literature in specific periods disdained pederasty only when it stepped over a boundary (adult free citizens could not be in the passive position in a same-sex relationship or this would have been condemned; but an adult free citizen could force young teenage boys, slaves and foreigners into the passive position without recrimination).

<sup>145</sup> See Bernadette Brooten, *Love between Women*, esp. her introduction and conclusion.

<sup>146</sup> Brooten, *Love between Women*, 244.

<sup>147</sup> Hvalvik, "The Present Context," 153.

<sup>148</sup> Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 313, fn101.

<sup>149</sup> The boldened part of this sentence is my expanded translation, which attempts to render the nuances we have been discussing into clearer (and more expansive) language. Is Paul referring entirely to the passive recipient (male) and an active penetrator (male)? It seems so, but at the very least these two terms lead us to understand Paul is dealing with same-sex behaviors.

## *A Word about Discussion of Homosexuality and the Church*

There are complex issues that this essay does not attempt to address, especially ones in which the church has been implicated by encouraging hatred toward gay people. My comments throughout this essay were not meant to be used to “clobber” anyone. Moreover, unbelievers are not the intended audience in this essay. This is a discussion within the church that attempts to respond to challenges that our understanding of the Bible should be revised into a more affirming approach toward homosexual lifestyles today. I do not expect unbelievers to care about what the Bible says in terms of living out their lives today. I do expect believers, who gather together in the church, to care deeply about the normative value of ethical principles offered in this book we honor as God’s Word. If our understanding of the Word of God for the past 2000 years has been wrong (as is charged in these challenges), then we need to see how that is the case and be convinced beyond any doubt. We use this Word as a guide for life and doctrine. Misunderstanding or misinterpreting this book could have present and even eternal consequences. There is much at stake here.

However, there must be love offered to unbelievers and even to believers who understand the Word differently from us. Harmful behavior toward people who are homosexuals or who identify themselves as having same-sex attractions is not in any way supported by the New Testament. Nonetheless, when gay-affirming Christians assert that they have discovered Paul does not mean what we think he means about homosexuality in Romans and 1 Corinthians, then we have some work to do to engage the church in meaningful dialogue and response to these challenges. A few years ago, theologian Stanley Grenz wrote a book entitled, *Welcoming but Not Affirming*,<sup>150</sup> in which he argued for showing love while not compromising the truth of God’s Word. Unfortunately, given the state of our culture and the push from the LGBTQ+ community, this sane word is now considered behind the times. Gay-affirming Christians argue that if we non-affirming Christians do not agree that same-sex relations are something God has purposefully created and therefore allows, then we are denying the gay person’s very identity. How can that ever be perceived as “welcoming,” they ask? For the LGBTQ+ community, affirmation is the only welcome that is truly a welcome for them in the church. For many persons today, their identity is wrapped up in their understanding of gender and sexuality. This seems to be a rather recent, modern approach to understanding the human being. For Christians, there is more to our identity as human beings in Christ than our sexuality.<sup>151</sup>

So how do we relate in ways that do not condemn others yet do not compromise our understanding of the principles of God’s Word? Paul offers us clear insight: “I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people (πόρνοις | *pornois*)—not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing to you that you must not associate

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<sup>150</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Welcoming but Not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), especially well explained in the concluding chapter.

<sup>151</sup> This topic related to gender, sexuality, and identity is an important one, but takes us beyond the boundaries of this paper. For a helpful attempt to offer a biblical theology of sexuality within the context of the church, see Darrin W. Snyder Belousek, *Marriage, Scripture, and the Church: Theological Discernment on the Question of Same-Sex Union* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021). Also, one approach that points to where modern society may have brought us to this point with gender and identity is by Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

(συναναμίγνυσθαι | *synanamignusthai*)<sup>152</sup> with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral (πόρνος |  *pornos*) or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside” (1 Cor 5:9-13a NIV).

## **Conclusion**

There is much that has been said in this paper already, yet there is much more that needs addressing.<sup>153</sup> While we could add a discussion of 1 Timothy 1:10, I have found that the evidence and challenges there are similar to the ones we have just considered. Therefore, I find what we have discussed thus far to be a contribution to the church for contending for the faith once delivered to the saints.

As I conclude, I want to refer again to Stanley Grenz’s book title, *Welcoming, but not Affirming*. Those of us who are submitted to the Bible as a foundation for doctrine and practice find it impossible to ignore the prohibitions against same-sex sexual acts we find there. Given what is at stake (inheriting the kingdom of God), we cannot take the revisionist approaches of gay-affirming scholars or writers with regard to the Scriptures as sufficiently clear or convincing to provide us with a reason to abandon Christianity’s long-held understanding of sexuality. One major difficulty for the church today is to find ways of being *open* and *welcoming* to all unbelievers, regardless of their behaviors or attitudes or orientations. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is for all humans—all of whom are sinners and fall short of the glory of God. This difficulty of being welcoming is made even more challenging for the church by gay-affirming Christians who argue that if we do not affirm a person’s own sexual identity as they have understood it to be, then we are not loving, caring, and certainly not welcoming. How can such a welcome be considered anything except “toxic?”<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> This Greek verb means to recline at table with someone—eating dinner and relaxing over a meal together in each other’s company.

<sup>153</sup> As mentioned earlier, there are numerous dimensions of this issue that the church needs to learn more about in dealing with the challenges of gay persons living among us in the world and in the church: the difficulty of offering a loving openness to unbelievers without compromising the truth of Scripture; the difficulty of dealing with gay-affirming Christians among us who do not see Scripture the same way as we might; the difficulty of answering the questions of those with same-sex attractions who are struggling with how to deal with them as faithful Christians; the difficulty of answering questions related to same-sex orientation, transgender issues, bisexuality, non-binary identity, and the like. However, the greater concern is the lack of an overall “theology of sexuality” that has been obvious in the church since the 1960s and the sexual revolution. We have not addressed fundamental sexual issues with both reasonableness and sincerity in the church. Due to our lack of an overall understanding of sexuality under the umbrella of a theology of the human being, we have been “flatfooted” in responding to recent developments concerning gay and transgender issues. We must learn to speak of sexuality from God’s perspective for human beings. This demands a lot of hard work *together* so that generations after us may build on the foundations we construct. It is my hope that this paper pushes us toward studying further so that we may produce a wholistic understanding of the human person as God intended us to be at creation but also as we are now after the fall into sin. Both aspects demand our attention. It is my belief that the books mentioned in fn 149 by Darrin Snyder-Belousek and Carl Trueman will assist us greatly in developing a theology that addresses the whole human being, including sexuality.

<sup>154</sup> Here the work of Carl Trueman is so helpful in highlighting a philosophical and psychological history of our culture in which humans can shape and identify their own gender and sexual identity. See Carl Trueman’s work, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution*.

Christians believe that the perfection of God's creation has been estranged by sin, but that fallen condition has been redeemed by the work of Christ's life, death, and resurrection on our behalf. The new creation available in Christ establishes a new order for believers—one that realigns our human condition to return us to fellowship with God. Our desires and inclinations are fueled by sin. They are disordered desires that cause us to love ourselves and things other than God. These desires are "contrary to nature," according to Paul. When they run our lives, they ruin our lives—and the lives of others. Following God's plan in creation returns us to a different desire, namely, that of pleasing God (Eph 5:10). Such desires are not just sexual—or homosexual. They are listed alongside same-sex acts in Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 6. Christians are not without desires and temptations to forsake this re-direction toward God. However, among believers there must be some level of obedience and submission of one's desires and inclinations to God. Those of us who are Pentecostals believe that the Holy Spirit sanctifies us, making us daily more and more like Christ. Nevertheless, for Christians, disordered desires are not sin unless they are dwelt upon inappropriately or acted upon.

Therefore, Christians can offer a welcoming invitation for all to come to a relationship with God. Due to our understanding of Scripture and God's intention for humanity, we *cannot support* same-sex acts or behaviors after one comes to Christ because to do so is to offer a false hope that God affirms same-sex relations. We can, however, offer a real hope to all people that God's plan for humans brings us to a rich relationship with God and other humans, in this life and the next.

The truth of God's Word, however, is not to be used as a bludgeon to "clobber" people, but as light that may make people uncomfortable in their sins and may highlight their need for God. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to convince people of sin and therefore our only task is to be faithful witnesses to the Word that the Spirit breathed and to the Christ who delivers us from darkness to light, having been sent from the Father. The Triune God loves humans enough not to leave us in our broken condition but to raise us to resplendent vistas of which we cannot even dream.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Several colleagues at Lee University and elsewhere have read this manuscript and offered insightful editions/additions, including Brian Peterson, Bill Simmons, Bryan Cross, Kevin Snider, and Jesse Stone, among others.