

St. John's Lutheran Church Winter Bible Study  
"The Bible and Homosexuality"  
**Session Six – Nature and Choice**

**Is Sexual Orientation a Choice?**

"Although much research has examined the possible genetic, hormonal, developmental, social, and cultural influences on sexual orientation, no findings have emerged that permit scientists to conclude that sexual orientation is determined by any particular factor or factors. Many think that nature and nurture both play complex roles; most people experience little or no sense of choice about their sexual orientation." (APA – <http://www.apa.org/topics/lgbt/orientation.aspx>)

Even researchers who take a conservative view of the data and support the traditional position on homosexual conduct "agree that there is a percentage of people for whom homosexual orientation is not a matter of choice." (ELCA Journeying Together, page 28)

*"Reparative therapy and sexual orientation conversion therapy...have serious potential to harm young people because they present the view that the sexual orientation of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth is a mental illness or disorder, and they often frame the inability to change one's sexual orientation as a personal and moral failure."* (American Psychological Association – <http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/just-the-facts.aspx>)

In 2013, Alan Chambers, the leader of Exodus International, a Christian "reparative therapy" organization that operated for nearly forty years, closed the organization, stated "99.9% of the people they had tried to help had not experienced a change in their sexual orientation," and apologized for promoting sexual reorientation efforts (Gushee, page 26 – <http://alanchambers.org/>)

There is a lack of compelling evidence to suggest that human sexual orientation is simply a matter of choice.

**Paul on Natural and Unnatural**

*"For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error."* (Rom 1:26-27)

## Paul's Letter to the Romans

The Apostle Paul wrote this letter to the church in Rome (ca 54 AD) to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ and as he planned to visit them (Rom 15:14-33)

The church was composed of both Gentile and Jewish Christians – and may have been established by believers who heard the good news at Pentecost (Acts 2:10)

It is (arguably) the most systematic presentation of Christian faith among Paul's letter

- ~ Paul states the gospel “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith...” (Rom 1:16-17) – the passage Martin Luther was studying when he had his ‘tower experience’
- ~ Paul continues – humans have all sinned (1:18-3:20), and are justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ (3:21-5:11), and sanctified by the Spirit (5:12-8:39) – Jews and Gentiles (9:1-11:36) – to live in love (12:1-15:13)

It is in the context of his argument in Romans 1-3 that Paul writes “exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural” (1:26-27).

### Is Paul Condemning “Homosexuality”?

In Romans 1:18-32, Paul argues

- ~ that even those without the *special revelation* of God given in Scripture (i.e. Gentiles) have been given the *general revelation* of God given in nature – and are therefore “without excuse” (1:20) in not worshipping God – they “exchanged” (Greek, *allasso*) the “glory of the immortal God” for images of humans and animals (1:23), they “exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (1:25)
- ~ for this idolatry, “God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged [Greek, *metellaxan*] natural intercourse for unnatural” as did “the men,” who committed “shameful acts with men” (1:26-27)
  - while this implies same-sex relations between women, it does not state the “unnatural intercourse” in which the women engaged
  - they “received in their own persons the due penalty for their error” (1:27) – ‘exchanging natural intercourse for unnatural intercourse’ *was itself* the penalty for ‘exchanging worship of God for worship of idols’ (Radmacher, page 789)

~ for this idolatry, Paul continues, “God gave them up to a debased mind and things that should not be done” (1:28) – a ‘vice list’ that includes “...envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless” (1:29-31)

Paul is reflecting a particularly Jewish argument against particularly Gentile vices – ‘impure, degrading, shameless, debased’ acts that violate the Holiness Code (Lev 17-26), “according to which sexual vices in particular were characteristic of the Gentiles and linked with idolatry” (Nissinen, page 106)

Paul’s condemnation of women and men “exchanging natural intercourse for unnatural” intercourse (1:26-27) makes sense only if Paul is referring to *heterosexuality* and not *homosexuality* as a constitutional orientation

~ same-sex behavior is not ‘unnatural’ for those who are ‘naturally’ homosexual

~ same-sex behavior is ‘unnatural’ for those who are ‘naturally’ heterosexual

*Might Paul be condemning the conduct not of homosexual people, but rather of heterosexual people engaging in same-sex acts* (Gorman, page 157, Gushee, page 87, Nissinen, page 109)

*And, given that same-sex acts in the Gentile (Greco-Roman) world at that time were predominately committed by heterosexual men engaged in abusive behaviors, might Paul be condemning these specific types of behaviors between two people of the same sex and not same-sex relationships in general*

### **How Does Paul Define “Unnatural”?**

In Rom 1-3, Paul does not define “natural” (Greek, *physis*) and “unnatural” (Greek, *para physin*) in terms of the creation accounts or the law of Moses – Gentiles did not have the Hebrew Scriptures – but the “law of nature” through which God the Creator revealed himself to the Gentiles (1:20) – the ‘common order of things’ as understood in daily life

In this context, Paul uses “natural” (*physis*) as it was understood in antiquity, “(*physis*) expresses a fundamental cultural role or conventional, proper, or inborn character or appearance, or the true being of a person or a thing rather than ‘nature’ in a genetic-biological sense, as a modern reader would perceive it.” (Nissinen, page 105)

Thus, for Paul “unnatural is a synonym for unconventional” (Rogers, page 77) – which does not necessarily mean “immoral”

- ~ In Rom 11:24, Paul states that God acted “contrary to nature” (*para physis*) by grafting the Gentiles into the tree of God’s people – he is stating God acted unconventionally, not immorally
- ~ In 1 Cor 11:14-15, Paul states, “Does not *nature (physis)* itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is *degrading* to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her *glory*?” – is an unconventional hairstyle immoral?

Paul indicates that same-sex relationships are immoral because they are unnatural, by which he means – given his use of the term “natural” in other contexts – they violate the conventional understanding of sexual relations in his cultural context – is Paul’s conventional understanding of sexual relationships in his context morally binding in all contexts?

*Paul’s argument in Romans 1-3 indicates that he assumes a heterosexual orientation is “natural,” and therefore same-sex behavior is “unnatural,” and is therefore indicative of the vices of the Gentile world. Why not affirm that Paul is not addressing publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships in this passage?*

### **Celibacy is not a Mandate**

While some opponents of same-sex relationships acknowledge that homosexuality is not a choice, they assert the only way for homosexual persons to avoid sin is to remain celibate for life

This mandate for ‘forced’ celibacy is not biblically grounded...

- ~ The Genesis creation accounts affirm that “it is not good” to be alone without a life partner (Gen 2:18) – and there are many good reasons to be married
- ~ Jesus (Matt 19:11-12) and Paul (1 Cor 7:7-9) both indicate that celibacy is a gift for those who are called to it in service to God, but not a requirement for those who are not called to it
- ~ While assuming heterosexual marriage, the *Apology of the Augsburg Confessional*, a primary confessional document for Lutherans, devotes an entire section arguing against “the law concerning celibacy” of priests (Article XXIII)

...and it is not compassionate.

an excerpt from Matthew Vine’s testimony (<http://www.matthewvines.com/transcript/>)

## **Justified by Grace through Faith**

Paul's argument in Rom 1-3 builds to the point where he declares, "...*For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*" (Rom 3:23-24)

This is the good news we are called to share as followers and as the community of Christ – we are loved by the God who made us and who came to save us and who will one day make us whole – God who has called us to love one another – later in Romans, Paul writes, "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law." (Rom 13:10)

*Professor Jack Rogers shares*, In 1999, professor Lewis Smedes, "recalling a line from an old hymn, 'There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea,' argued that the church should accept people who are homosexuals as full members. His last line was, 'I think I know my own heart well enough to believe that if [God's] mercy is wide enough for me, it is wide enough for them'... When we realize how gracious God has been to us, we cannot deny God's grace to others." (Rogers, page 107)