

EXEGETICAL BRIEF:

SELECT NEW TESTAMENT PASSAGES CONCERNING HOMOSEXUALITY

*With Special Reference to What the Bible Says-- and Doesn't Say-- About Homosexuality
by Mel White (Lynchburg, VA: Soulforce, Inc.)*

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Rom 1:26-27

26) διὰ τοῦτο παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς εἰς πάθη ἀτιμίας, αἵ τε γὰρ θήλειαι αὐτῶν μετήλλαξαν τὴν φυσικὴν χρῆσιν εἰς τὴν παρὰ φύσιν,

(SST [Smith Standard Translation]): On account of this God gave/handed them over into passions of dishonor [shameful passions], for even their women exchanged the natural [sexual] relations for the [ones] contrary to the natural/nature,

- διὰ τοῦτο refers to what Paul says in vs. 25, that the godless people of this world “worshipped and served the creation rather than the one who created” (SST). Because of their false and despicable worship, God hands them over to the worst kind of sin, sin which even in the eyes of many of the heathen is not acceptable. In such sin godless people alter what God intended them to be and do by nature.
- The word translated as “women” (θήλειαι), especially in contrast with ἄρσενες in v. 27, emphasizes the distinction between women and men regarding sexual matters. Douglas Moo: “Paul’s use of the antonyms θήλυς/ἄρσεν (v. 27) rather than, e.g., γύνη/άνήρ, stresses 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.’ For the pair θήλυς/ἄρσεν is consistently associated with the creation narrative (cf. Gen. 1:27; Matt. 19:4; Mark 10:6; although the only other occurrence of the pair in Paul [Gal. 3:28] does not clearly allude to creation).”¹
- The “exchange” that these women carried out (μετήλλαξαν) is a complete and total exchange. The natural order that was established by God has been completely thrown out for one that is against his will.
- According to BDAG², χρῆσιν refers here especially to sexual intercourse. Thus, the “natural relations” for a woman, i.e., to function as God designed her, would involve sexual relations with a man. Such is according to God’s plan and design.³ What such women described here pursue instead is what is unnatural.⁴ This same phrase is used in

¹ Douglas J. Moo, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 114, fn 114.

² Frederick W. Danker, et al. ed. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, Third Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 1089. Commonly, and hereafter, referred to as “BDAG.”

³ Genesis 2.

⁴ τὴν παρὰ φύσιν.

other Greek literature to describe the “unnatural pleasure” that a lover of boys pursues.⁵ Keep in mind that if something is against the intention of God, it is sinful.

- This is the only portion of Scripture that specifically mentions homosexuality among females.

27) ὁμοίως τε καὶ οἱ ἄρσενες ἀφέντες τὴν φυσικὴν χρῆσιν τῆς θηλείας ἐξεκαύθησαν ἐν τῇ ὀρέξει αὐτῶν εἰς ἀλλήλους, ἄρσενες ἐν ἄρσεσιν τὴν ἀσχημοσύνην κατεργαζόμενοι καὶ τὴν ἀντιμισθίαν ἣν ἔδει τῆς πλάνης αὐτῶν ἐν ἑαυτοῖς ἀπολαμβάνοντες.

SST: and likewise/similarly the men [after giving up/gave up] the natural relations of the women [and] were inflamed in connection with their [sexual] desire for one another, men in connection with men the shameless deed committing and receiving in connection with themselves the penalty of their error which was/is necessary.

- The word ὁμοίως is important to note. Since he has just clearly described the sinful actions of females having sex with other females, Paul now turns his attention to males. Most accept that Paul is here speaking of homosexual acts, since he specifically mentions men being “inflamed”⁶ for one another, and also men committing “the shameless deed”⁷ with each other. Thus the type of actions Paul describes in v. 26 are also of a homosexual nature.
- Here the males⁸ did not simply “exchange” God’s design for their own desires; they “gave up”⁹ God’s design altogether. They did not find God’s design of males having sexual relations with females to be satisfactory.
- In their delusional search for pleasure these males kindled a fire within themselves. Ἐξεκαύθησαν describes having a strong desire for something, so much so that one is “inflamed,” specifically with sensual desire.¹⁰ Such ill-conceived passion consumes one from the inside out. The word Paul uses for “desire,” ὀρέξει, connotes a condition of *strong* desire. It was used in that day always in an unfavorable sense, especially as it referred to sexual desire. Again, for a male to have such strong sexual desire for another male is contrary to God’s design and plan for the crown of his creation.
- What specifically is τὴν ἀσχημοσύνην, “the shameless deed”? BDAG adds that in its use here it is “behavior that elicits disgrace.”¹¹ The word is used in one other New Testament verse to mean “nakedness.”¹² Paul is using a relatively mild term to describe a lewd act. While the word ἀσχημοσύνην is somewhat vague, it is clear from the context

⁵ BDAG, 1089.

⁶ ἐξεκαύθησαν.

⁷ ἀσχημοσύνην.

⁸ οἱ ἄρσενες.

⁹ ἀφέντες.

¹⁰ BDAG, 303.

¹¹ BDAG, 147.

¹² Revelation 16:15 – “something considered too private for public exposure.” BDAG, 147.

that the act is anything but, since “inflamed...men in connection with men” are committing this degradation of nature.

- Men committing the “shameless deed” with other men receive τὴν ἀντιμισθίαν ... τῆς πλάνης αὐτῶν.¹³ The word ἀντιμισθίαν emphasizes that one receives what is deserved, and could be translated as “recompense.”¹⁴ But the context dictates that this “payback”¹⁵ is negative; thus the translation “penalty.” Again, it may seem somewhat mild for Paul to describe such a heinous sin as an “error.” But at the root of this word (πλάνη) is the concept of *wandering*, especially “from the path of truth.”¹⁶ Men who are engaged in homosexual acts definitely have wandered away from a path on which God placed them and for which he designed them: to have sexual relations only with women.
- Paul modifies “the penalty of their error” in two ways: that it is received “in connection with themselves”¹⁷ and that it “was/is necessary.”¹⁸ The former phrase emphasizes the intensely personal nature of the penalty. Some believe means that the homosexual offender is punished with his homosexuality, since it is a perversion of God’s will (e.g., Chrysostom¹⁹). Others correlate this “penalty” with what Paul writes in 1 Co 6:9-10: “...this could be a vivid way of saying that those who engage in such activities will suffer eternal punishment; they will receive ‘in their own persons’ God’s penalty for violation of his will.”²⁰ The necessity of this penalty arises from God’s desire to protect his creation and keep men in line with their God-given nature. The perversion of this nature is severe enough in the case of homosexuality to warrant specific mention of punishment.

Comments on Mel White’s “What the Bible Says”

White’s primary mistake in his comments concerning these two verses is that he limits their applicability. He states that Paul is writing only about the priests and priestesses of “Aphrodite, Diana, and other fertility gods and goddesses....”²¹ He ignores that in v. 18 Paul makes it clear about whom he is speaking: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven upon every ungodliness/impiety and unrighteousness of men who stifle the truth in connection with unrighteousness...” (SST). Paul is writing, that is, about unbelievers, about those who have not (subjectively) been declared righteous by God and who practice their ungodliness freely in the face of the objective truth about God and his Word.

1 Cor 6:9-11 (SST [Smith Standard Translation])

¹³ “The penalty of their error.”

¹⁴ BDAG, 90.

¹⁵ Literally, “wage in exchange for/in place of.”

¹⁶ BDAG, 822.

¹⁷ ἐν ἑαυτοῖς.

¹⁸ ἦν ἔδει.

¹⁹ Moo, 116.

²⁰ Moo, 116.

²¹ Mel White, *What the Bible Says-- and Doesn’t say-- About Homosexuality* (Lynchburg, VA: Soulfource, Inc.), 15.

9) ἢ οὐκ οἴδατε ὅτι ἄδικοι θεοῦ βασιλείαν οὐ κληρονομήσουσιν; μὴ πλανᾶσθε· οὔτε πόρνοι οὔτε εἰδωλόατραι οὔτε μοιχοὶ οὔτε μαλακοὶ οὔτε ἀρσενοκοῖται

SST: Or do you not know that unjust/unrighteous/crooked people will not inherit the kingdom of God? [Do not be deceived/mistaken] [Make no mistake]: Neither fornicators nor idolaters nor adulterers nor effeminate nor pederasts

- After chastising the Corinthian Christians for bringing lawsuits against one another in the secular courts, a practice that shows them to be acting like the “unrighteous” in the world, Paul drives his point home by listing various types of unrighteous²² people. He stresses that the truth of what follows is indisputable by stating μὴ πλανᾶσθε, which intimates that to believe the opposite means one has wandered from the truth.²³
- The word translated as “fornicators”²⁴ is a relatively general word for “one who practices sexual immorality.”²⁵ It is here exclusive of adulterers, since Paul also mentions them specifically. In more ancient Greek this word was also used to describe male prostitutes. The English word “pornography” comes from the stem of this word.
- Next on the list is εἰδωλόατραι. It may seem out of place for Paul to list “idolaters” among those who are engrossed in sexual sin. Yet is not any form of sexual sin idolatry? That is, when one is engaged in sexual sin he has placed the pursuit of his own pleasure in the place of all else, including his Creator. His perverse drive to derive pleasure in manifold and unnatural ways demonstrates the idolatry of the fornicator, adulterer, homosexual, etc.
- Μοιχοί are simply “adulterers,” those who are not faithful to their spouses. The term is used three times in the New Testament to refer to one who is unfaithful to an earthly spouse. It can also be used figuratively to refer to someone who is unfaithful to God.
- The translation of μαλακοί is slightly more problematic. The adjectival meaning of μαλακός is “soft,” “pertaining to being yielding to touch.”²⁶ It is used twice in the New Testament to refer to clothes.²⁷ But the word can also mean, as seen here, “effeminate,” “pertaining to being passive in a same-sex relationship.”²⁸ This word was used to describe “men and boys sodomized by other males” in a homosexual relationship.²⁹ Certain Bible translations are somewhat misleading here. For example, the NSRV, NLT, and NIV translate this word with “male prostitutes,” which is too narrow in meaning. The REB translation of “sexual pervert” is too broad.³⁰ What this term describes is simple: the non-dominant partner in a homosexual relationship.

²² Or “crooked” (ἄδικοι).

²³ See above note on πλάνη.

²⁴ πόρνοι.

²⁵ BDAG, 854.

²⁶ BDAG, 613.

²⁷ Luke 7:25 and Matthew 11:8.

²⁸ BDAG, 613.

²⁹ Ibid..

³⁰ The ESV combines this term and the next and translates “men who practice homosexuality.”

Mel White's comments concerning this word are very limited: "Greek scholars say that in first century the Greek word malaokois [sic] probably meant "effeminate call boys." The New Revised Standard Version says "male prostitutes."³¹ It is unclear who these "Greek scholars" are, but the definition put forth by BDAG is widely accepted. Especially in juxtaposition to the next term, the idea of "non-dominant partner in a homosexual relationship" is accurate.

- That this is clear is obvious by the next classification of people barred from God's kingdom: the ἀρσενοκοῖται. This word combines "male" and "bed" to designate "a male who engages in sexual activity with a person of his own sex,"³² in other words, a homosexual. Even more precisely, this word was used to describe the "one who assumes a dominant role in same-sex activity."³³ Note that this definition is the opposite of the μαλακοί, the ones who take the passive role in same-sex activity. That the domineering homosexual role is accurately understood consider another definition of ἀρσενοκοίτης pederast. "Pederast" is literally a "lover of boys," and more specifically, "one who practices anal intercourse especially with a boy."³⁴

Mel White comments regarding this term: "As for arsenokoitai, Greek scholars don't know exactly what it means – and the fact that we don't know is a big part of this tragic debate. Some scholars believe Paul was coining a name to refer to the customers of 'the effeminate call boys.' We might call them 'dirty old men.' Others translate the word as 'sodomites,' but never explain what that means."³⁵ Again, White's "Greek scholars" seem relatively limited in their understanding of the word. While it is true that Paul is the only writer to use this word in the New Testament,³⁶ its meaning was quite clear. In fact, Paul may have been trying to stress how it was a horrendously offensive act!

The fact that Paul did not use one of the many words in Greek homoerotic literature to refer to sodomites or homosexuals probably means that he wished to leave no doubt as to the unacceptability of the desire and behavior. He could not legitimize homosexuality by even referring to it in the same way its perpetrators did, all the while leaving no doubt as to his meaning.³⁷

Another comment from BDAG: "Paul's strictures against same-sex activity cannot be satisfactorily explained on the basis of alleged temple prostitution... or limited to contract w. boys for homoerotic service."

White also states, "I find most convincing the argument from history that Paul is condemning the married men who hired hairless young boys (malakois) for sexual pleasure just as they hired smooth-skinned young girls for that purpose."³⁸ White's argument is unconvincing due to his limited use of "Greek scholars."

³¹ White, 17.

³² BDAG, 135.

³³ BDAG, 135. Polycarp to the Philippians 5:3 also uses this word in this sense.

³⁴ Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, <www.webster.com>, accessed January 16, 2007.

³⁵ White, 18.

³⁶ Here and in 1 Timothy 1:10.

³⁷ Richard Starr, *The Scriptural Teaching on Homosexuality and Modern Trends in Christian Churches*, Unpublished essay presented to the Ohio Conference Spring Pastoral Conference, Michigan District, WELS, held at Beautiful Savior Evangelical Lutheran Church, Cincinnati, Ohio, April 15-16, 1985. p. 15.

³⁸ White, 18.

(While no commentary is offered for this verse, it is included here to maintain the context.)

10) οὔτε κλέπται οὔτε πλεονέκται, οὐ μέθυσοι, οὐ λοῖδοροι, οὐχ ἄρπαγες βασιλείαν θεοῦ κληρονομήσουσιν.

SST: neither thieves nor greedy persons [one who desires to have more than is due], nor drunkards, nor revilers/abusive persons, nor robbers/swindlers/rogues will inherit the kingdom of God.

11) καὶ ταῦτά τινες ἦτε· ἀλλὰ ἀπελούσασθε, ἀλλὰ ἡγιασθητε, ἀλλὰ ἐδικαιώθητε ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ ἐν τῷ πνεύματι τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν.

SST: And some of you were these (things); rather/but you washed yourselves [were washed?], rather/but you were sanctified/consecrated/dedicated, rather/but you were justified/declared righteous in (connection with) the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in (connection with) the Spirit of our God.

- Paul shows in this verse the level of the degradation to which many of those he has mentioned in vss. 9-10 had fallen. That is, these sins, these lifestyles, keep people out of the kingdom of God. To be able to enter the kingdom, in order to gain eternal salvation, it is necessary to undergo what Paul lists in this verse: washing, sanctifying, and being declared righteous. If the sins Paul mentions in v. 9 are not that serious, the same conclusion must be reached about the sins Paul mentions in v. 10.

Works Cited:

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