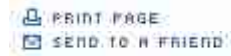


# Homosexuality: Rebellion Against God

A scholar of Paul explains how the great Apostle understood--and decried--homosexuality.

By Richard B. Hays



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*Gary came to New Haven in the summer of 1989 to say a proper farewell. My best friend from undergraduate years at Yale, he was dying of AIDS. While he was still able to travel, my family and I invited him to come visit us one more time.*

*During the week he stayed with us, we went to films together, we drank wine and laughed, we had long sober talks about politics and literature and the gospel and sex and such. Above all, we listened to music. As always, his aesthetic sense was fine and austere; as always he was determined to face the truth, even in the shadow of death.*

*We prayed together often that week, and we talked theology. It became clear that Gary had come not only to say goodbye but also to think hard, before God, about the relation between his homosexuality and his Christian faith. He was angry at the self-affirming gay Christian groups, because he regarded his own condition as more complex and tragic than their apologetic stance could acknowledge. He also worried that the gay apologists encouraged homosexual believers to "draw their identity from their sexuality" and thus to shift the ground of their identity subtly and idolatrously away from God. For more than 20 years, Gary had grappled with his homosexuality, experiencing it as a compulsion and an affliction. Now, as he faced death, he wanted to talk it all through again from the beginning, because he knew my love for him and trusted me to speak without dissembling. For Gary, there was no time to dance around the hard questions.*

*In particular, Gary wanted to discuss the biblical passages that deal with homosexual acts. Among Gary's many gifts was his skill as a reader of texts. After leaving Yale and helping to found a community-based Christian theater group in Toronto, he had eventually completed a master's degree in French literature. Though he was not trained as a biblical exegete, he was a careful and sensitive interpreter. He had read hopefully through the standard bibliography of the burgeoning movement advocating the acceptance of homosexuality in the church. In the end, he came away disappointed, believing that these authors, despite their good intentions, had imposed a wishful interpretation on the biblical passages. However much he wanted to believe that the Bible did not condemn homosexuality, he would not violate his own stubborn intellectual integrity by pretending to find their arguments persuasive.*

*The more we talked, the more we found our perspectives interlocking. Both of us had serious misgivings about the mounting pressure for the church to recognize homosexuality as a legitimate Christian lifestyle. As a New Testament scholar, I was concerned about certain questionable exegetical and theological strategies of the gay apologists. As a homosexual Christian, Gary believed that their writings did justice neither to the biblical texts nor to his own sobering experience of the gay community that he had moved in and out of for 20 years.*

*Gary and I agreed that we should try to encourage a more nuanced discourse. Tragically, Gary soon became too sick to carry out his intention. His last letter to me was an effort to get some of his thoughts on paper while he was still able to write. By May of 1990 he was dead.*

*The Bible hardly ever discusses homosexual behavior. There are perhaps half a dozen brief references to it in all of Scripture. In terms of emphasis, it is a minor concern-in contrast, for example, to economic injustice.*

In I Corinthians 6, Paul, exasperated with the Corinthians, some of whom apparently believe themselves to have entered a spiritually exalted state in which the moral rules of their old existence no longer apply to them (cf. I Cor. 4:8, 5:1-2, 8:1-9), confronts them with a blunt rhetorical question: "Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God?" He then gives an illustrative list of the sorts of persons he means: "fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, *malakoi*, *arsenokoitai*, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers."

I have left the terms pertinent to the present issue untranslated, because their translation has been disputed. The word *malakoi* is not a technical term meaning "homosexuals" (no such term existed either in Greek or in Hebrew), but it appears often in Hellenistic Greek as pejorative slang to describe the "passive" partners—often young boys—in homosexual activity. The word, *arsenokoitai*, is not found in any extant Greek text earlier than I Corinthians. Some scholars have suggested that its meaning is uncertain, but Robin Scroggs has shown that the word is a translation of the Hebrew *mishkav zakur* ("lying with the male), derived directly from Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 and used in rabbinic texts to refer to homosexual intercourse. The Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) of Leviticus 20:13 reads, "Whoever lies with a man as with a woman [*meta arsenos koiten gynaikos*], they have both done an abomination." This is almost certainly the idiom from which the noun *arsenokoitai* was coined. Thus, Paul's use of the term presupposes and reaffirms the holiness code's condemnation of homosexual acts. This is not a controversial point in Paul's argument; the letter gives no evidence that anyone at Corinth was arguing for the acceptance of same-sex erotic activity. Paul simply assumes that his readers will share his conviction that those who indulge in homosexual activity are "wrongdoers" (*adikoi*, literally "unrighteous"), along with other sorts of offenders in his list.

In I Corinthians 6:11, Paul asserts that the sinful behaviors catalogued in the vice list were formerly practiced by some of the Corinthians. Now, however, since Paul's correspondents have been transferred into the sphere of Christ's lordship, they ought to have left these practices behind: "This is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God." The remainder of the chapter, then (I Cor. 6:12-20), counsels the Corinthians to glorify God in their bodies, because they belong now to God and no longer to themselves.

The I Timothy passage includes *arsenokoitai* in a list of "the lawless and disobedient" whose behavior is specified in a vice list that includes everything from lying to slave-trading to murdering one's parent, under the rubric of actions "contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel."

One other possibly relevant passage is the apostolic decree of Acts 15:28-29, which rules that Gentile converts to the new Christian movement must observe a list of minimal purity prohibitions in order to have fellowship with the predominantly Jewish early church.

If, as seems likely, these stipulations are based on the purity regulations of Leviticus 17: 1-18:30, then they might well include all the sexual transgressions enumerated in Leviticus 18:6-30, including homosexual intercourse. This suggestion about the Old Testament background for Acts 15:28-29 is probable, but not certain.

The most crucial text for Christian ethic concerning homosexuality remains Romans 1, because this is the only passage in the New Testament that explains the condemnation of homosexual behavior in an explicitly theological context. The substance of Paul's exposition begins with a programmatic declaration in 1:16-17: the gospel is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'" The gospel is not merely a moral or philosophical teaching that hearers may

accept or reject as they choose; it is rather the eschatological instrument which God is working out in the world.

Paul is undertaking in his own way to "justify the ways of God to men" by proclaiming that the righteousness of God (*dikaiosyne theou*) is now definitively manifest in the gospel. As a demonstration of his righteousness, God has "put forward" Jesus Christ, precisely in order "to prove at the present time that he himself (i.e. God) is righteous" (Rom. 3:25-26). For Paul, the gospel that proclaims God's justice is also a power, "the power of God for salvation" reaching out graciously to deliver humanity from bondage to sin and death.

The genius of Paul's analysis lies in his refusal to posit a catalog of sins as the cause of human alienation from God. Instead, he delves to the root: all other depravities follow from the radical rebellion of the creature against the Creator (1:24-31). In order to make his accusation stick, Paul has to claim that these human beings are actually in rebellion against God, not merely ignorant of him. The way in which the argument is framed here is crucial: ignorance is the consequence of humanity's primal rebellion. Because human beings did not acknowledge God, "they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened." The passage is not merely a polemical denunciation of selected pagan vices; it is a diagnosis of the human condition. The diseased behavior detailed in verses 24-31 is symptomatic of the one sickness of humanity as a whole. Because they have turned away from God, "all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin." The aim of Romans 1 is not to teach a code of sexual ethics; nor is the passage a warning of God's judgment against those who are guilty of particular sins. Rather, Paul is offering a diagnosis of the disordered human condition: he adduces the fact of widespread homosexual behavior as evidence that human beings are indeed in rebellion against their creator. Homosexuality, then, is not a provocation of "the wrath of God" (Rom. 1:18); rather, it is a consequence of God's decision to "give up" rebellious creatures to follow their own futile thinking and desires.

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