THE PRACTICES OF ROMANS 1:26: HOMOSEXUAL OR HETEROSEXUAL?

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When Paul illustrates shameful gentile practices in Romans 1 he begins with a description of unnatural sexual activities (1:26-27). Most commentators on these verses interpret this as a condemnation of all homosexuality, female and male. That verse 27 condemns male homosexual practice is clear. However, verse 26 does not specify that the unnatural sexual partner of the woman is another woman. This paper will argue that there is little reason for understanding verse 26 as describing homosexual activity, and good reason for understanding it as a description of unnatural heterosexual intercourse.

In many modern societies there is a broad parity between the genders, and thus one term, homosexual,¹ provides a common category for gays and lesbians. However, Classical culture lacked both this parity and a common category for female homosexuality and male homosexuality. When Romans 1:26-27 is read by modern western readers this common category of "homosexual" is invoked and thus verse 26 is assumed to be a reference to female homosexuality. However, if the reader comes to these verses without the assumption that lesbian practice is a counterpart to gay practice there is no particular reason to read verse 26 as referring to homosexual activity.

Modern Interpretations

Most commentators on Romans 1:26-27 merely assume that female and male homosexuality are being condemned in parity. Michel (68) states that according to Paul the two genders "suchen

¹ E.g. German: homosexuell/gleichgeschlechtlich. French: homosexual. Spanish: homosexual. Note that in all of these languages, including English, when the term is used alone it is usually assumed to be a reference to male homosexuality unless the context specifies female homosexuality or both forms.
nicht mehr das andere Geschlecht, sondern entbrennen in der Begierde Weib an Weib und Mann an Mann" (cf. Wilckens, 109). A few actually argue for the point. Cranfield (125), Morris (92) and Dunn (64, 73-74) argue that Paul used "female" and "male" instead of "women" and "men" because the subject was sexual differentiation. Though this observation has some rhetorical merit if the sexual orientation of 1:26 is certain, it is insufficient evidence to establish Romans 1:26 as discussing female homosexuality as a counterpart to male homosexuality. Also this does not explain why verse 26 initiates a description of sexuality without specifying the woman's sexual partner in contrast to verse 27. Apparently the female's sexual partner was obvious but the male specifically abandons the natural partner for an unnatural one.

Works which specialize in homosexuality in the Bible and the church show little or no critical analysis of Romans 1:26. Concentrating their critical energy on verse 27, they assume that verse 26 speaks of female homosexuality in parity with the male homosexuality of verse 27. This is true of Boswell's classic work (112-113), McNeill (53-56) and Malloy (194). Even Cantarella's excellent work on Classical homosexuality leaves the point unexamined (170). Only rarely is the possibility of a heterosexual understanding of verse 26 entertained. Bartlett (32) is the least negative, stating that it is "not completely clear" that verse 26 refers to female homosexuality, though this is likely because it is connected with male homosexuality in the following verse. Bailey makes a similar argument after briefly considering a heterosexual reading of verse 26 (40-41; cf. Van de Spijker, n77, p. 248).

Clearly all of these writers are working from the assumption that Paul and his audience had a single category of "homosexual" which was subdivided into male and female forms, much as we find in modern western culture. However, it is the position of this paper that such a parity between male and female homosexuality was not common in this period in either Classical or Jewish culture, and that the anachronistic reading has led to an almost universal misinterpretations of Romans 1:26 among modern readers.

Note also that these works, like the Biblical material they are analyzing, concentrate on male homosexuality with marginal treatment of female homosexuality. This is due in part to the source material, for Romans 1:26 is the only possible verse in the Bible which refers to female homosexuality at all, and if this verse is read