

The Book of Romans

Some Background And A Little Insight

by Mary Pearson

Most of us are painfully aware that two of the most-used verses against us are found in Romans, specifically Romans 1:26,27. I feel it's important to know the truth, first for self-acceptance, and then to educate those who would use these verses against us.

Don't ever shy away from the Bible just because it has been used against us. Pursue it until you know the truth! So here is a little background on the book of Romans and why these two verses do not apply to you if you are GLBTI or Q.

Paul - Author of the Book of Romans

Paul was also known by his Jewish name Saul.

He was born in Tarsus, which was a major center for Greek education and culture. But as a Jew, Paul also studied in Jerusalem with Gamaliel, a leading teacher of the Law of Moses. Paul was part of a religious group called the Pharisees, who believed that people could serve God best by strictly obeying the Law of Moses.

Saul did his best to try to destroy the movement that had become known as "The Lord's Way," but he was radically changed when the risen Christ appeared to him in a vision and chose him to be His follower and to spread the Good News to all people.

Paul spent about 15 years preaching and helping to create new groups of followers in Asia Minor and Greece.

Paul's name appears in the greeting of thirteen New Testament "letters" (nearly half of the books in the New Testament) but many scholars today believe that he did not actually write all of them. All agree that Paul wrote Romans.

Although Romans was written before Paul had ever been to Rome, he eventually did see Rome when he was taken there as a prisoner.

According to church tradition, the Emperor Nero had Paul killed around A.D 64.

Rome

Rome, the capital city of the Roman Empire in Paul's day, was a beautiful city located on the Tiber River and built on seven hills. It had many great buildings made of marble and was famous for its oval stadium (Coliseum), the Pantheon, great military arches, the Circus Maximus (a huge stadium that held 150,000 people), a theater that seated 40,000, and temples for the many Roman gods and goddesses. In Paul's day, Rome had at least thirteen synagogues as well as shrines for gods like Apollo, Mithra, and Isis.

How is the Book of Romans Constructed?

Romans is a letter written in the traditional Greek letter writing style of the first century A.D. Letter writers in Paul's day usually first identified who was sending the letter (1:1-6), then gave the names of the persons they were writing to (1:8). This was usually followed by a greeting. As in most of Paul's letters, a prayer of thanksgiving follows the greeting (1:8-15), and the letter closes with a final greeting and blessing (16:1-27).

What's the Story Behind the Scene?

A group of believers who trusted in Jesus Christ as God's Messiah existed in Rome long before Paul planned his trip there. By A.D. 40 or 50, Jews who were not Jesus' followers and this new group of Jesus' followers were fighting so much that the Roman Emperor Claudius made them all leave Rome (see Acts 18: 1-4).

What Makes Romans Special?

In the early church, Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians sometimes disagreed about what made a person acceptable to God and how the followers of Christ should live. In Romans, Paul boldly announces that the good news is "God's powerful way of saving all people who have faith, whether they are Jews or Gentiles" (1:16)

Why Was Romans Written?

Paul wrote this letter about A.D. 55 - 56 to introduce himself to the followers of Christ at Rome, who likely included new Gentile Christians as well as Jewish Christians who had returned to Rome after being thrown out some years earlier. These Christians, as well as Christians in other parts of the Mediterranean world, had more than one way of understanding the good news. Jewish Christians in Rome and in Jerusalem continued to follow the Law of Moses, but Gentile Christians did not follow the Law. So, who was right? What place, if any, did the Law of Moses have for Gentile Christians? And how did the people of Israel fit into God's plan for sharing the good news?

Paul teaches in Romans that the good news was based in the beginning on God's promise to Israel's ancestor Abraham, whose faith made him acceptable to God (4:13). The Law, given later to Moses and the people of Israel, revealed how God's people were to live. Still later, God sent Jesus Christ to forgive sins and make people acceptable because of their faith, something which the Law on its own could not do (3:21-26). This did not mean the Law was useless or that the people who followed the Law (Israel) were no longer part of God's people. But now, Paul says, only those who have faith in Jesus Christ can become fully acceptable to God.

(From The Learning Bible - English Contemporary Version - not verbatim)

Now then, let's look at these two verses in Romans that have done so much damage to our community. Scripture verses are in italics from the NIV (New International Version).

Rom 1:26,27

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

Whenever a passage of scripture starts with "**therefore**" or in this case "**Because of this**", it behooves us to see what came before, since this is the consequence of the previous passage. We can't just take these two verses out of context without examining the surrounding verses. We need to know "**Because of what????**" The section that comes before this starts at Romans 1:18 and continues to the end of the chapter - verse 32. So let's see who Paul is addressing. Are these two verses directed at you? I don't think so.

Rom 1:18,19

*The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven **against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness**, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.*

Are any of you godless or wicked? Would you be on this Christian website if you were godless? No, I don't think so. And I don't think that very many people are truly wicked. Well if you're not godless or wicked, then I guess you're not included in this sentence. Let's go on and see if Paul is including you in any of the other verses that surround those two damning verses, 26 and 27.

Rom 1:20-23

For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

So do you glorify God and give thanks to Him? You do? Wonderful! Do you worship idols that look like man or birds or animals? You don't? Then I guess Paul is not talking to you in these sentences either.

Rom 1:24,25

*Therefore God gave them (WHO? Oh yes. We just covered that, didn't we. God gave **those who were godless and wicked, those who didn't glorify Him or give thanks to Him**) over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator - who is forever praised. Amen.*

Here we go again with that old topic of idol worship. This was a big problem of the new Christians, and one which is addressed often in scripture. The Jews and early Christians were surrounded by pagans for whom idol worship was the norm, but God didn't want His chosen people to have anything to do with that. Our God is a jealous God!

Rom 1:26,27

Because of this**, (There is is folks! "Because of this" - i.e. the reasons given above - godless, wicked, idol worshippers), **God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

Perversion is "deviation from the norm". Since Paul is speaking of "men abandoning 'natural' relations with women", then it seems obvious to me that Paul is speaking to straight men here, since it would be "unnatural" for a gay man to have sexual relations with women. Likewise for the women who were exchanging "natural" relations for "unnatural" ones. We're talking about straight women here folks - not we lovely lesbians for whom loving other women is "natural". We haven't "exchanged" anything!

Rom 1:28

*Furthermore, **since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God**, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done.*

Would you be subscribed to ChristianGays.com Newsletters if you did not wish to retain the knowledge of God? Of course not! You are here to learn more about God, so I guess that Paul isn't speaking to you in this passage either.

Rom 1:29-32

They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

Well there may be times when our imperfect human nature may cause us to be somewhat greedy or to disobey our parents. We might gossip occasionally or even boast now and then, but this is not who we truly are, and we certainly don't fit into any of the other categories in this paragraph of God-haters, inventing evil, heartless, etc, and we definitely don't approve of those who practice them.

It seems overwhelmingly evident to me, that Paul was not addressing we who love the Lord, but those folks who were getting involved in the pagan practices and rituals of their neighbours.

It has been my observation over the years, that in addition to God's love for ALL, one overwhelming theme in Scripture is God's jealousy of His people, and His intolerance for idolatry. I believe that this passage of Scripture is about idolatry, not homosexuality.

So if anyone suggests that you are not acceptable to God because you are gay, based on Romans 1:26,27, please suggest that Paul was addressing heterosexual (for whom same-sex sex was "unnatural") God-haters, the wicked, and those who were worshipping idols. You do not fall within that category.

Addendum

By Rev. Kellie Rupard-Shorr of MCC, El Paso – used with permission

Romans is an excellent example of how a verse, out of context, can make anything seem like Biblical reality. Looking at verses 26 & 27, it would certainly appear that God has a problem with same-sex sexual behavior - but look again at 22-25. This isn't a passage about homosexuality at all.

Quickfacts:

1. It's very clear from the previous verses that pagan temple worship is what is being described in the passage. God reacts to trading the "truth" for a lie, and the tendency of the Roman citizenry toward pagan temple worship and prostitution.
2. The key here is the word "unnatural". Roman sexuality did not see same-sex practice as "unnatural". In fact, to the Roman world it was very, very natural, even a part of growing up. What the faith and Paul saw as unnatural was forced sexuality, slavery and prostitution. This abuse of sexuality and religion is as wrong today as it always was.
3. The word "unnatural" in verse 26 is the Greek word "phusis", meaning natural production or extension (i.e. having children) and it is likely that Paul's concern was that these temple prostitutes who were female, were not getting pregnant (due to bodily damage and syphilis). Many people in the world have sex without the ability to re-produce. We no longer see that as unnatural or a result of sin. The word "natural" (referring to men) is the word "phisukos" and refers to instinct. Paul saw both slavery and sexual abuse of males non-instinctual. But what about Gay men and Lesbians? Same-sex fulfillment is natural and instinctual.

The Good News:

"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death." (Romans 8:1-2)