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# The Pastoral Response to Homosexuality

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Melinda Selmys

In his September 1, 2011 column “Gay and Christian,” Russell Saltzman addressed my article in the *New Oxford Review*, in which I sketched a brief history of homosexual politics over the past two and a half millennia as a background for understanding the present controversy. I wrote that: “It is an uncomfortable fact that for a long time a campaign of hatred and persecution has been waged against those who experience same-sex attractions.” Saltzman takes issue with what he imagines to be an argument against the authority of St. Paul’s theological views on the morality of homosexuality. He interprets my argument as proposing that: “The contemporary gay experience [is] non-exploitative, mutually enriching, and increasingly monogamous [and] ought to be accepted as a normal alternative.”

That is not my argument at all. There are two basic elements to the Christian response to homosexuality: the theological, and the pastoral. I have absolutely no disagreement with the theological argument that was put forward by St. Paul. What I was trying to explain is the harsh pastoral tone so often taken in early and medieval writings on the subject of homosexuality.

While it seems obvious to me that we can’t simply throw out the moral teaching on homosexuality without completely unraveling the fabric of Christian sexual teaching, it seems equally obvious that we can no longer justify the persecution and castration homosexuals have experienced for much of history. In other words, it is necessary to distinguish between the visceral, emotional reactions which ancient writers—including St. Paul—had towards homosexuality, and the theological doctrine which developed out of a holistic Scriptural vision of sex.

**This distinction must be made by orthodox Christians,** not in order to weaken St. Paul's teaching on homosexuality, but rather to strengthen it. Let's look at Romans 1, the most often quoted and detailed examination of homosexuality in the Pauline corpus:

“The anger of God is being revealed from heaven against all the impiety and depravity of men who keep truth imprisoned in their wickedness. For what can be known about God is perfectly plain to them since God himself has made it plain. Ever since God created the world his everlasting power and deity—however invisible—have been there for the mind to see in the things he has made. That is why such people are without excuse: they knew God and yet refused to honor him as God or to thank him; instead, they made nonsense out of logic and their empty minds were darkened. The more they called themselves philosophers, the more stupid they grew, until they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for a worthless imitation, for the image of mortal man, of birds, of quadrupeds and reptiles. That is why God left them to their filthy enjoyments and the practices with which they dishonor their own bodies, since they have given up divine truth for a lie and have worshiped and served creatures instead of the creator, who is blessed forever. Amen! That is why God has abandoned them to degrading passions: why their women have turned from natural intercourse to unnatural practices and why their menfolk have given up natural intercourse to be consumed with passion for each other, men doing shameless things with men and getting an appropriate reward for their perversion. In other words, since they refused to see it was rational to acknowledge God, God has left them to their own irrational ideas and to their monstrous behavior. And so they are steeped in all sorts of depravity, rottenness, greed, and malice, and addicted to envy, murder, wrangling, treachery and spite. Libelers, slanderers, enemies of God, rude, arrogant and boastful, enterprising in sin, rebellious to parents, without brains, honor, love or pity. They know what God's verdict is: that those who behave like this deserve to die—and yet they do it; and what is worse, encourage others to do the same.” (Rom 1:18-32)

Usually this quotation is trimmed considerably, so that it only includes the direct condemnation of homosexuality. To understand it properly, it's important to look at it

in context, which is why such a large block of text is included here. St. Paul is developing an argument against the kind of philosophies that had arisen within Greco-Roman culture. In ancient Greece, homosexuality was closely tied to the idea of teaching and mentorship. In Sparta, a young man beginning his studies would actually be assigned an older lover as a matter of course—something like the system of old British public schools, except that the pederastic element was openly acknowledged and encouraged. In Plato’s *Symposium*, Pausanias gives the Athenian view as follows: “[T]hese two customs, one the love of youth, and the other the practice of philosophy and virtue in general, ought to meet in one, and then the beloved may honorably indulge the lover.”

St. Paul is not giving an argument against homosexuality in Romans 1, but rather using homosexuality as an illustrative example in his argument against the idolatries and philosophies of the Greeks (by which he means all pagans, including the Romans to whom he is writing). His argument takes it for granted that the reader knows that homosexuality is “unnatural,” and “shameless,” so he’s not concerned with proving that it is. Rather, he’s using it as part of a rhetorical attack on ancient paganism: the appeal is meant to be emotionally loaded, and is therefore intimately connected with the cultural feelings and prejudices of his audience.

The rhetorical purpose of Romans 1 must be acknowledged in order to understand the sort of language that Paul chooses to use. He refers to “filthy enjoyments,” “degrading passions,” “shameless things,” and “monstrous behaviors”—certainly not the kind of terminology that one would find in a modern Vatican document on the pastoral care of homosexuals. These language choices are clearly reflective of the socio-historical context in which St. Paul wrote, a reality that is underscored by the placement of this passage within an argument about ancient Greek philosophy.

If the emotional phrases are stripped away, what remains is an interesting analysis of homosexuality within the context of idolatry. St. Paul describes a very specific process of moral decline: the Greeks begin by refusing to honor God as God, even though they know that He is the creator of the universe. Having “worshiped and served creatures

instead of the creator,” the gentiles proceeded to adopt all sorts of immoral practices, including homosexuality. St. Paul thus perceives homosexuality as a symptom and consequence of idolatry, a clear and visible illustration that worshiping false gods leads to moral disorder.

**Although St. Paul’s condemnation of homosexuality comes within the context** of a discussion of idolatry, and within a historical context of pederasty and exploitative homosexuality, that does not mean that his censure does not apply to modern homosexual relationships. In the two millennia since Paul wrote, Christian doctrine on sexuality has developed considerably. Modern theology doesn’t rely merely on a simplistic, literal understanding of any single Scriptural author, but rather on a holistic analysis of human sexuality as it is portrayed and understood throughout revelation. This is combined with a robust notion of natural law, as well as the observations of those involved in pastoral practice, to produce the sort of sophisticated understanding of sexuality that one finds in *Humanae Vitae* or *Theology of the Body*. Regardless of the cultural context in which St. Paul wrote, it is absolutely clear that homosexuality, either in the ancient or the modern form, is irreconcilable with the underlying logic of Scriptural teaching on sexuality.

So why bother to analyze the cultural context of Romans 1 at all? Isn’t it just an exercise in historical trivia, one that should be widely skirted in order to avoid scandal and confusion? On the contrary, homosexual apologists consistently rely on contextual arguments in order to dismiss St. Paul’s teachings on the subject, and therefore it is necessary to address the social and cultural concerns that inform the text. A modern homosexual trying to approach the Scriptures would, understandably, be put off by St. Paul’s characterization of homosexuality; Paul comes across as possibly hateful and homophobic. If one understands, however, that he was writing to a world which saw exploitative forms of homosexuality as something approaching the norm, the vitriolic tone makes a lot more sense and is easier to forgive.

It is also important for modern Christians to understand that there is a very real difference between homosexuality as it was generally practiced in St. Paul’s time, and

homosexuality as it is generally practiced today—not in order that the whole cloth of Christian sexual teaching can be quietly unraveled, but in order to develop a pastoral approach that is appropriate in a modern context. The Vatican has already led the way in this respect, adopting a markedly different tone from the one taken by St. Paul, while still retaining the essential theological aspects of his teaching.

*Melinda Selmys is the author of [Sexual Authenticity: An Intimate Reflection on Homosexuality and Catholicism](#) (Our Sunday Visitor, 2009). A regular columnist for the National Catholic Register, her articles have appeared in numerous Catholic publications, including This Rock, The Catholic Answer, and Envoy. She writes from Canada, where she and her husband are awaiting the birth of their sixth child.*

## **RESOURCES**

Russell E. Saltzman, [Gay and Christian](#)

Melinda Selmys, [Authentic Dialogue Is Possible](#)