

RELATIONS NATURAL AND UNNATURAL: A RESPONSE TO JOHN BOSWELL'S EXEGESIS OF ROMANS 1

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ABSTRACT

John Boswell's influential interpretation of Rom 1:26–27 is seriously misleading in several important particulars. A careful exegesis of the passage shows that Paul unambiguously describes homosexual behavior as a violation of God's intention for humankind. Responsible interpretation must *first* recognize that Paul condemns homosexuality and *then* ask how that condemnation bears upon the formation of normative ethical judgments. The final section of the essay offers some guidelines on the use of Romans 1 in Christian ethics.

1. INTRODUCTORY OBSERVATIONS: A DEBATE JOINED

In a recent lecture at Yale Divinity School,¹ Professor John Boswell of the Yale History Department, author of the widely influential *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, expressed surprise and some disappointment that the exegetical arguments in his book had been ignored or accepted without challenge by biblical scholars. Though he had expected rigorous rebuttals from the scholarly community, his work had in fact been greeted with tame acquiescence or tight-lipped silence; he hoped that some serious scholarly response would emerge from specialists in Old Testament and New Testament studies, so that all could profit from the exchange of views.

Boswell's innovative treatment of the few texts relevant to his topic has certainly flung down the gauntlet before the received wisdom of the commentators and lexicographers. At several points, his study has uncovered possible biases and weaknesses in our received translations of the biblical texts. Even in some cases where his own position remains unconvincing, such as in the discussion of how to translate *arsenokoitai*² in 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10 (Boswell, 1980: 106–07, 335–53), he has shown that there is room for reasonable doubt about the meaning of biblical terms that have often been understood as references to homosexual persons or behavior; future lexicographical studies will have to take his work into account. The erudition of Boswell's book has rapidly earned for it an authoritative place in theological discussions of homosexuality.

At one point, however, Boswell's exegetical work is seriously flawed: his

handling of Romans 1:26–27 contains basic errors that require a response. This response is particularly necessary since his work is so widely cited in the rapidly proliferating literature dealing with homosexuality as a theological and ecclesiastical issue.³ The following essay, then, offers a rebuttal to Boswell's exegesis of Romans 1. The rebuttal is offered in a spirit of gratitude for Boswell's insistence on discussing these vexed issues with scholarly care and charity and for his gracious invitation to dialogue. At the same time, my response is put forward with deep concern about the impact of Boswell's exegesis upon the church. As I will argue, he not only misconstrues the Romans text but also fosters an unfortunate confusion between exegesis and hermeneutics. It is my hope that a rigorous discussion of the interpretation of Romans 1:16–32 will shed light on matters of exegetical methodology and thus help to dispel some of the confusion surrounding a sensitive issue.

In the present polarized climate, an initial word of caution is perhaps necessary. Boswell does not need to be told, as perhaps others will, that a refutation of his exegesis of one text constitutes neither a comprehensive attack upon his book nor (still less) a disconfirmation of its major theses. The book addresses a *historical* problematic: how is the rise of massive social intolerance of homosexuality in the early Medieval period to be explained? Boswell's foray into New Testament exegesis is intended to serve a subsidiary role in the argument by establishing that Christendom's subsequent hostility to homosexual behavior is grossly disproportionate to the weight of the biblical warrants against it. (The apologetic thrust of Boswell's work should not be overlooked; it is in part an effort to exonerate the Bible and Christian theology of responsibility for the oppression of "gay" people.) To assess Boswell's basic historical thesis (that social intolerance of homosexuality was a function of the triumph of "rural" cultural patterns over the "urban" culture of the Roman Empire) is a task beyond the scope of this essay. An overall evaluation of a work as sprawling and ambitious as Boswell's can only be achieved through summing up informed assessments of its diverse components; my limited goal is to assess the validity of Boswell's argument at one point where it intersects with my own concerns and competence. At this point of intersection serious doubts must be raised not only against Boswell's exegesis of Romans 1 but also against his historical sketch of an early Christianity relatively tolerant of homosexual practices. The considerations advanced in the present essay certainly require significant revisions in Boswell's analysis; however, it is possible that his hypothesis is capable of refinements which could accommodate my objections without forcing him to abandon his historical schema.

At the same time, however, the interpretation of Romans 1:16–32 bears a more crucial role in the church's wrestling with its ethical teachings than in Boswell's framing of a historical hypothesis. It is conceivable that Boswell could be wrong about Romans and still be right in his major thesis. If, how-

ever, there is a single major New Testament text which unambiguously portrays homosexual practice as a sign of humanity's alienation from God the creator, Christians are compelled to consider whether this text (as Scripture) carries a normative force entirely distinguishable from its value as a piece of historical evidence about early Christian attitudes. If, on the other hand, Boswell is right about Rom 1:26–27 (and 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10), there is no New Testament justification for rejecting homosexual practice as a legitimate moral option for Christians. Thus there is potentially much at stake here.

Nonetheless, these questions about the normative role of Romans 1 in Christian ethics must be deferred until the concluding section of this essay. The primary concern before us is to test Boswell's reading of the passage against the evidence offered by the text.

2. EXEGETICAL CONSIDERATIONS: ROMANS 1:16–32

2.1 Boswell's Reading of Romans 1:26–27.

Before undertaking an examination of Romans 1:16–32, it will be useful to summarize the substance of Boswell's comments (1980:107–17) on the passage so that the issues will be clearly drawn. His analysis concentrates on Romans 1:26–27 and makes four basic points.

1. Although some have suggested that Paul's real polemical target here is the practice of temple prostitution connected with idolatrous pagan worship, Boswell regards such an interpretation as "inadequate" for three reasons: (a) temple prostitution was not limited to homosexual activities; heterosexual temple prostitution was equally common and surely would have been equally objectionable to Paul; (b) "it is clear that the sexual behavior itself is objectionable to Paul, not merely its associations"; (c) "Paul is not describing cold-blooded dispassionate acts performed in the interest of ritual or ceremony," because he explicitly refers to "lust" as the motivation for homosexual behavior.

2. The real purpose of Paul's reference to homosexual activity "is not to stigmatize sexual behavior of any sort but to condemn the Gentiles for their general infidelity." Once Paul has used this "mundane analogy" to chastise the Gentiles for the "theological sin" of rejecting the one true God, he drops the subject of homosexuality entirely.

3. "The persons Paul condemns are manifestly not homosexual: what he derogates are homosexual acts committed by apparently heterosexual persons." According to Boswell, Paul says nothing here about persons who are "naturally" of homosexual orientation. This interpretation rests on the observation that the women in question "*exchanged* natural relations for un-

natural" and that the men "gave up natural relations with women." Boswell's point here is buttressed by a quotation from John Chrysostom's commentary on the passage: "Only those possessing something can change it."

4. Furthermore, "there is . . . no clear condemnation of homosexual acts in the verses in question." This rather startling claim is supported by two pieces of evidence: (a) in Paul's time there was no clearly-defined concept of "natural law," and indeed general Pauline usage would indicate that "nature" (*physis*) here should be understood to refer not to an abstract universal moral order but to "the *personal* nature of the pagans in question" (cf. Gal 2: 15, 4: 8, Rom 2: 27); (b) the preposition *para*, used in 1: 26 in the phrase *para physin* (KJV: "against nature"; RSV: "unnatural"), normally means not "contrary to" but "more than" or "in excess of." These observations together lead Boswell to the conclusion that Paul's reference to sexual relations *para physin* serves not to label such behavior as immoral but to describe it as "unexpected, unusual, or different from what would occur in the normal order of things."

On the first of these points, Boswell sides with the overwhelming majority of commentators, and he is surely right that cult prostitution is not in view in the passage, though his third argument for this position (see above) is a dubious one. (Are cultic ceremonies of this sort necessarily "cold blooded, dispassionate acts"? Even if they were, which seems unlikely, it would not be surprising to find Jewish and Christian polemic describing such pagan activities as manifestations of lust.) Again, on the second point, Boswell is merely reemphasizing a fact readily visible to anyone who reads the passage in its context; modern commentators (see Furnish, 1979: 73-78; Käsemann, 1980: 36-52; Cranfield, 1975: 104-35) universally agree that the purpose of the passage as a whole is to proclaim that "the wrath of God" is now being revealed against all who do not acknowledge and honor God. Romans 1 is neither a general discussion of sexual ethics nor an explicitly prescriptive admonition about the sexual behavior appropriate for Christians.

Thus, Boswell's original contribution to the discussion of this text is to be found in points three and four: Paul's words do not apply to persons of homosexual orientation, and in any case homosexual acts are merely described as unusual rather than immoral. Both of these claims, however, are exegetically insupportable. To substantiate this strong negative judgment on Boswell's interpretation, two steps are necessary. First we must turn directly to a consideration of the text of Romans, examining in context the function of Paul's passing reference to homosexuality. Then, in light of this exegetical discussion, we will return to Boswell's proposals and offer an assessment.

2.2 The Thrust of Paul's Argument

Why does Paul introduce the reference to homosexual behavior in Rom 1: 26-27? If he is not giving moral instruction to his readers, why does the topic

arise at all? A proper understanding of Paul's depiction of homosexual behavior in these verses depends upon a grasp of their place in the development of the argument. The texture of the argumentation, however, is dense enough to demand careful scrutiny. Boswell's attention to the context of the passage is inadequate, and even the relatively thorough discussion of Victor Furnish (1979: 73–78) and Robin Scroggs (1983: 109–18) overlook certain matters of importance for our topic. Thus, it will be prudent to begin with an examination of the unfolding logic of Paul's argument in Romans 1.

2.2.1 The keynote: the gospel of the righteousness of God. After the greeting and introductory thanksgiving, 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 righteous one shall live through faith.'" This theologically pregnant formulation emphasizes first of all the character of the gospel as an active manifestation of God's power. The gospel is not merely a moral or philosophical teaching which hearers may accept or reject as they choose; it is rather the eschatological instrument through which God is working his purpose out in the world (cf. Schütz, 1975: 40–53). Two facets of this power's character are highlighted. First, Paul proclaims the inclusive sweep of the gospel: it is "for everyone who has faith" (*panti tō pisteuonti*), not only Jews but Greeks also. This concern about the relationship between Jews and Gentiles as equal beneficiaries of God's saving power and grace is one of the letter's central themes.

Closely related but distinguishable is the second central concern that emerges in 1: 17: "the righteousness of God." Although the exact meaning of this phrase has been much debated by New Testament scholars, its major thrust in Romans is to affirm God's justice and integrity.⁴ The revelation of the righteousness of God through the gospel is presented by Paul as an answer to the problem of theodicy: does God deal justly with humankind? Is God unjust to inflict wrath on us? Has God abandoned his people? (Cf. 3:5, 11:1).

Precisely because the issue of theodicy is central in the letter, it is no accident that Paul draws his showcase proof-text from the book of Habakkuk, in which the prophet frames a searching challenge to God's justice:

O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,
and thou wilt not hear?
Or cry to thee "Violence!"
and thou wilt not save?

.

Thou who art of purer eyes than to behold evil
and canst not look on wrong,
why dost thou look on faithless men,
and art silent when the wicked swallows up
the man more righteous than he?

(Hab 1:2, 13)

The affirmation that "the righteous one shall live through faith" (cf. Hab 2:4) is precisely God's response to the prophet's agonized outcry. By citing this text at the beginning of the letter to the Romans, Paul links his gospel to the OT prophetic affirmation of God's justice and faithfulness. Like Habakkuk long before him and like Milton long after, Paul then undertakes in his own way to "justify the ways of God to men" by proclaiming that the righteousness of God 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). The gospel is, among other things, a vindication of God. Of course, this vindication of God's righteousness entails more than an abstract declaration of God's moral uprightness; it must never be forgotten that for Paul the gospel which 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.

2.2.2 God's wrath revealed: unrighteousness rampant. Having sounded this keynote, Paul abruptly modulates into a contrasting key by turning to condemn the unrighteousness of fallen humanity: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth." The Greek word which the *RSV* translates as "wickedness" (*adikia*), used twice in 1:18 for unmistakable emphasis, is the direct antithesis of "righteousness" (*dikaïosynē*), and unless we translate it as "unrighteousness" we are apt to miss the intended contrast: the *righteousness* of God is manifest in God's wrath against the *unrighteousness* of humankind. The ensuing discussion (1:19–32) explains, documents, and elaborates this "unrighteousness of men."

The "unrighteousness of men" consists fundamentally in their refusal to honor God and render him thanks (1:21). God has clearly shown forth his "power and deity" in and through the created world (1:19–20), but the human race in general has disregarded this evidence and turned on a massive scale to idolatry (1:23). The genius of Paul's analysis, of course, lies in his refusal to posit a catalogue 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; cf. Käsemann, 1980:47: "Paul paradoxically reverses the cause and consequence: moral perversion is the result of God's wrath, not the reason for it").

Of course, 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* they did not acknowledge God, "they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened" (1:21; cf. 2 Thess 2:10b–12). Paul does not argue on a case-by-case basis that every single individual has first known and then rejected God; instead, thinking in mythico-historical categories, he casts forth

a blanket condemnation of humankind. The whole passage is "Paul's real story of the universal fall" (Scroggs, 1983: 110). As Käsemann (1980: 47) puts it, "For the apostle, history is governed by the primal sin of rebellion against the Creator, which finds repeated and universal expression." 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 vv. 24–31 is symptomatic of the one sickness of humanity as a whole. Because they have turned away from God, "all men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin" (3:9).

According to Paul's analysis, God's "wrath" against his fallen human creatures takes the ironic form of allowing them the freedom to have their own way, abandoning them to their own devices.

Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator. . . . (1:23–25)

These and the following sentences, in which the refrain "God gave them up" occurs three times (1:24, 26, 28), repeatedly drive home Paul's point: idolatry finally debases both the worshiper and the idol. God's judgment allows the irony of sin to play itself out; the creature's original impulse towards self-glorification ends in self-destruction. The refusal to acknowledge God as creator ends in blind distortion of the creation.

The particular depravities catalogued in vv. 24–31, then, serve two basic purposes in Paul's argument. (Notice that the failings listed in vv. 29–31 have nothing to do with sexual behavior.) (a) First of all, when the text is read with literal precision, these various forms of "base mind" and "improper conduct" are seen to be *manifestations* (not provocations) of the wrath of God, punishments inflicted upon rebellious humanity (as stressed by Furnish, 1979:76–77), rather like the plagues visited upon the Egyptians in Exodus. (The idea is a familiar one in Hellenistic Judaism; for an interpretation of the Egyptian plagues in these terms, see Wisdom 11:15–16, 12:23: "In return for their foolish and wicked thoughts, which led them astray to worship irrational serpents and worthless animals, thou didst send upon them a multitude of irrational creatures to punish them, that they might learn that one is punished by the very things by which he sins. . . . Therefore those who in folly of life lived unrighteously thou didst torment through their own abominations.") Thus, the listing of these depravities serves as a warrant for the basic claim that "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven" (1:18a). Paul is not warning his readers that they will incur the wrath of God if they do the things that he lists here; rather, speaking in Israel's prophetic tradition,

he is presenting an empirical survey of rampant human lawlessness as *evidence* that God's wrath and judgment are already at work in the world.⁵ (b) At the same time, the heaping-up of depravities also serves to warrant Paul's evaluation of humanity as deeply implicated in "ungodliness and wickedness" (1: 18b). John Calvin (1961: 34) saw clearly that Paul uses homosexuality as an illustration of his point because

Ungodliness is a hidden evil, and therefore Paul uses a more obvious proof to show that they cannot escape without just condemnation, since this ungodliness was followed by effects which prove manifest evidence of the wrath of the Lord. . . . Paul uses these signs to prove the apostasy and defection of men. . . .

It is certainly true (as noted by Scroggs, 1983: 113–14) that Paul's portrayal of homosexual behavior is of a secondary and illustrative character in relation to the main line of argument; however, the illustration is one which both Paul and his readers would have regarded as particularly vivid. Rebellion against this Creator who may be "clearly seen in the things that have been made" is made palpable in the flouting of sexual distinctions that are fundamental to God's creative design. The reference to God as creator would certainly evoke for Paul, as well as for his readers, immediate recollections of the creation story in Genesis 1–3, which proclaims that "God created man in his own image . . . male and female he created them," charging them to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1: 27–28).⁶ Similarly, Gen 2: 18–24 describes Woman and Man as created for one another and concludes with a summary moral: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife [LXX: *gynaika*], and they become one flesh." Thus the complementarity of male and female is given a theological grounding in God's creative activity: God has made them to become "one flesh." By way of sharp contrast, in Romans 1 Paul portrays homosexual behavior as a "sacrament" (so to speak) of the anti-religion of human beings who refuse to honor God as creator: it is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual reality, figuring forth through "the dishonoring of their bodies" the spiritual condition of those who have "exchanged the truth about God for a lie" (1: 24–25). Thus, Paul's choice of homosexuality as an illustration of human depravity is not merely random: it serves his rhetorical purposes by providing a vivid *image* of humanity's primal rejection of the sovereignty of God the creator.

2.3 Rhetorical Devices and Conventions

In addition to noting how Rom 1: 26–27 fits into the logical structure of Paul's argument, it is also helpful to observe several ways in which the rhetorical strategy of the passage operates. The text is full of artful devices, but particularly salient for our present concerns are the repetition of the verb

“to exchange” and the use of conventional language concerning “nature” and Gentiles.

2.3.1 “Exchange” as a rhetorical device. The language of “exchange” plays a central role in this passage, emphasizing the direct parallelism between the rejection of God and the rejection of created sexual roles. The “exchange” imagery first appears in 1:23, where Paul charges that rebellious humans have “exchanged (*ēllaxan*) the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles.” The accusation is recapitulated in 1:25, where it is for the first time connected directly to sexual impurity: *because* “they exchanged (*metēllaxan*) the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator,” God handed them over to “the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves.” Up to this point, Paul’s condemnation could apply equally well to all sexual offenses, heterosexual as well as homosexual. In 1:26–27, however, he introduces a further development in his account of humanity’s tragic rebellious trade-off: “their women exchanged (*metēllaxan*) natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another.” The deliberate repetition of the verb *metēllaxan* forges a powerful rhetorical link between the rebellion against God and the “shameless acts” (1:27, *RSV*) which are themselves both evidence and consequence of that rebellion.

2.3.2 “Nature” and sexual practice. In describing what it is that straying humans have “exchanged,” Paul for the first time introduces the concept of “nature” (*physis*) into the argument (1:26): they have exchanged (translating literally) “the natural use for that which is contrary to nature” (*tēn physikēn chrēsin eis tēn para physin*). The repetition of “the natural use” in 1:27 makes it unmistakably clear that the phrase refers to heterosexual intercourse as opposed to homosexual intercourse, which is categorized as “contrary to nature” (*para physin*). But what does Paul mean by “nature,” and where does this idea come from?

There are abundant instances, both in the Greco-Roman moral philosophers and in literary texts, of the opposition between “natural” (*kata physin*) and “unnatural” (*para physin*) behavior. These categories play a major role in Stoicism, where right moral action is closely identified with action *kata physin*. In particular, the opposition between “natural” and “unnatural” is very frequently used (in the absence of convenient Greek words for “heterosexual” and “homosexual”) as a way of distinguishing between heterosexual and homosexual behavior. (For the following examples and others, see Furnish, 1979: 58–67; Scroggs, 1983: 59–60. All the following translations of Greco-Roman and Jewish authors are from the Loeb Classical Library editions, except where otherwise noted.) For example, the Stoic-Cynic preacher Dio Chrysostom, after charging that brothel-keeping dishonors the goddess Aphrodite “whose name stands for the natural (*kata physin*) intercourse and union of the male and female,” goes on to suggest that a society which permits such

practices will soon find its uncontrolled lusts leading to the still more deplorable practice of pederasty:

Is there any possibility that this lecherous class would refrain from dishonoring and corrupting the males, making their clear and sufficient limit that set by nature (*physis*)? Or will it not, while it satisfies its lust for women in every conceivable way, find itself grown weary of this pleasure, and then seek some other worse and more lawless form of wantonness? . . . The man whose appetite is insatiate in such things . . . will turn his assault against the male quarters, eager to befoul the youth who will very soon be magistrates and judges and generals, believing that in them he will find a kind of pleasure difficult and hard to procure. (*Discourse* 7.135, 151–52)

Likewise, Plutarch has Daphnaeus, one of the speakers in his *Dialogue on Love*, disparage “union contrary to nature with males” (*hē para physin homilia pros arrēnas*), as contrasted to “the love between men and women,” which is characterized as “natural” (*tē physei*). A few sentences later, Daphnaeus complains that those who “consort with males” willingly are guilty of “weakness and effeminacy,” because “contrary to nature (*para physin*),” they “allow themselves in Plato’s words ‘to be covered and mounted like cattle’” (*Dialogue on Love* 751C, E). Plutarch’s reference to Plato demonstrates the point that Paul did not originate the application of the *kata physin/para physin* dichotomy to heterosexual and homosexual behavior. Its common appearance in the writings of the Hellenistic moral philosophers is testimony to a convention which can be traced back at least as far as Plato (*Laws* I.636C), almost invariably in contexts where a negative judgment is pronounced on the morality or propriety of the “unnatural” homosexual relations.

This categorization of homosexual behavior as “contrary to nature” was adopted with particular vehemence by Hellenistic Jewish writers, who tended to see a correspondence between the philosophical appeal to “nature” and the clear teaching of the Law of Moses. “The Law recognizes no sexual connections,” writes Josephus, “except for the natural (*kata physin*) union of man and wife, and that only for the procreation of children. But it abhors the intercourse of males with males, and punishes any who undertake such a thing with death” (*Ap.* 2.199, Loeb translation corrected; the allusion, of course, is to Lev 20: 13; cf. Lev 18: 22, 29). Elsewhere in the same work, Josephus deplores “intercourse with males” as *para physin*, and accuses the Greeks of inventing stories about homosexual behavior among the gods as “an excuse for the monstrous and unnatural (*para physin*) pleasures in which they themselves indulged” (*Ap.* 2.273, 275). Paul’s contemporary Philo uses similar language in a long passage branding pederasty as “an unnatural pleasure (*tēn para physin hēdonēn*)” (*Spec. Leg.* 3.37–42). Philo’s distaste for homosexuality receives its most elaborate expression in his retelling of the Sodom story (*De Abr.* 133–41); he charges that the inhabitants of Sodom “threw off from their necks the law of nature (*ton tēs physeōs nomon*) and applied them-

selves to deep drinking of strong liquor and dainty feeding and forbidden forms of intercourse. Not only in their mad lust for women did they violate the marriages of their neighbors, but also men mounted males. . . ." After a lurid description of the homosexual practices of the people of Sodom, he leads into the conclusion of the tale with an account of God's judgment of the matter:

But God, moved by pity for mankind whose Savior and Lover He was, gave increase in the greatest possible degree to the unions which men and women naturally (*kata physin*) make for begetting children, but abominated and extinguished this unnatural and forbidden intercourse, and those who lusted for such He cast forth and chastised with punishments. . . .

I have cited these texts at some length because they demonstrate that in Paul's time the categorization of homosexual practices as *para physin* was a commonplace feature of polemical attacks against such behavior, particularly in the world of Hellenistic Judaism. When this idea turns up in Romans 1 (in a form relatively restrained by comparison to some of the above examples), we must recognize that Paul is hardly making an original contribution to theological thought on the subject; he speaks out of a Hellenistic-Jewish cultural context in which homosexuality is regarded as an abomination, and he assumes that his readers will share his negative judgment of it. In fact, the whole design and logic of his argument demands such an assumption. Though he offers no explicit reflection on the concept of "nature," it is clear that in this passage Paul identifies "nature" with the created order. The understanding of "nature" in this conventional language does not rest on empirical observation of what actually exists; instead, it appeals to an intuitive conception of what ought to be, of the world as designed by God. Those who indulge in sexual practices *para physin* are defying the creator and demonstrating their own alienation from him.

2.3.3 A rhetorical trap. Not only with regard to the idea of "nature," but in many other ways as well, the language in which Paul articulates his indictment of unrighteous humanity owes much to the language of standard Hellenistic Jewish polemic against Gentiles. Commentators frequently cite the Wisdom of Solomon, a first-century B.C.E. text which recounts the shortcomings of the Gentiles in terms which Paul appears to be echoing in Romans 1:

For all men who were ignorant of God were foolish by nature;
And they were unable from the good things that are seen
to know him who exists.
Nor did they recognize the craftsman while paying heed to his
works.

.
Therefore those who in folly of life lived unrighteously
Thou didst torment through their own abominations.

(Wisdom 13:1, 12:23)⁷

Anyone schooled in the thought-world of Hellenistic Judaism, as reflected by the Wisdom of Solomon, would surely be responsive to the rhetoric of Romans 1, which would probably be heard as a condemnation of the pagan Gentiles. The design of the argument positively encourages the reader to join in and affirm the justice of God's wrath against these "men who by their wickedness suppress the truth," these idolators, these sexual deviants, these enemies of God. But Paul's argument also conceals a rhetorical trap in 2: 1: "Therefore, you have no excuse, O man, whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgment upon him you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things." The reader who gleefully joins in the condemnation of the unrighteous is "without excuse" (*anapologētos*) before God (2: 1), just as those who refuse to acknowledge God are *anapologētoi* (1: 20). The radical move that Paul makes is to proclaim that all people, Jews and Gentiles alike, stand equally condemned under the just judgment of a righteous God. While this suggests that Paul's purpose in Rom 1:26–27 is not to provide moral instruction for Roman Christians, it does not mean that all moral standards become irrelevant — at least that is not what Paul intends (cf. Rom 6: 1–23). It does mean, however, that Paul has shaped the argument in a way that is designed to entice his readers first to feel revulsion and indignation against "those sinful pagans" and then to recognize themselves as standing before God under the same judgment. It is a clever and effective rhetorical tactic, when the text is read as a whole, but the possibility of misunderstanding arises if we stop reading after 1: 32. If we are to be faithful readers of the text, we should never read Paul's condemnation of homosexual practices in 1:26–27 apart from the admonition of 2: 1.

3. A RESPONSE TO BOSWELL'S PROPOSALS

Having undertaken this exegetical review of Romans 1, we are now in a position to comment directly on Boswell's interpretation of the text. The reader will recall that Boswell's major contentions are two: Paul is referring to "homosexual acts committed by apparently heterosexual persons," and in any case there is "no clear condemnation of homosexual acts in the verses in question" (Boswell, 1980: 109–10). Let us take up the latter point first before returning (in 3.2, below) to address the former.

Anyone who has followed the discussion of Rom 1: 16–32 in this essay will immediately perceive that Boswell is able to defend the latter assertion only by disregarding completely the argumentative context of Rom 1: 26–27. In the context of Paul's exposition, the reference to homosexual behavior functions as *prima facie* evidence of the moral confusion and blindness which has come upon the human race as a result of its refusal to acknowledge God the creator. To claim, as Boswell (1980: 114, 112) does, that Paul regards homosexual acts as "extraordinary, peculiar" but not "morally reprehensible"⁸ is to ignore

the plain sense of the text, which places its explicit reference to homosexuality in direct parallelism with the "base mind and improper conduct" which the vice list of 1:29–31 elaborates.

In view of the incontrovertible clarity of the evidence at this point, how can Boswell seek to maintain the position that he takes? He focuses on the expression *para physin* (1:26) and discusses the possible meanings of its component parts, noun and preposition, apart from their setting in Romans 1. His arguments on this score must now be examined.

3.1 "Nature" and Its Contraries

3.1.1 The Meaning of 'Physis.' First of all, Boswell (1980: 110) argues that when Paul refers to "nature" he cannot have in mind any notion of "natural law," because such a concept "was not fully developed until more than a millennium after Paul's death." This assertion must be carefully qualified. Certainly, "natural law" was not in Paul's time a fully developed topic within Christian theology, nor did such an idea play any well-defined role in Paul's thought generally.

Caution is necessary here, however. Boswell seriously underestimates the importance of the Stoic background of Paul's phrase. Though Stoics did not characteristically speak of a "Law of Nature" (Koester, 1974: 263–66),⁹ the appeal to "nature" as a warrant for various norms of conduct is ubiquitous in Stoic writings. The meaning of the term is not precisely consistent; sometimes it means something like the orderly structure of ideal reality, and other times it appears to mean, as Robert M. Grant (1981: 60–61) suggested in a review of Boswell's book, "convention as understood by me." (For an isolated instance of the latter sense of *physis* in Paul, see 1 Cor 11: 14.) In some cases, *physis* becomes closely identified with "reason." In any case, *physis* in Stoicism always assumes a positive valence, so that actions *kata physin* are praised and actions *para physin* blamed. The influence of Stoic thought was pervasive in first-century popular moral philosophy, and its impact on Paul's conceptual categories is nowhere more apparent than in this passage (see Cranfield, 1975: 128–29, and the literature cited there). Note, for instance, Rom 1:28, where Paul uses Stoic technical terminology: *ta mē kathēkonta* (RSV: "improper conduct"). As I have already indicated, Hellenistic Jewish thinkers tended to adopt and "circumcise" the philosophical category of "nature" by identifying it with the Law and with God's creative intention. It is precisely this Hellenistic Jewish milieu from which the thought-patterns of Rom 1: 18–32 emerge; thus, it would be arbitrary and unjustified to interpret the phrase *para physin* in Rom 1:26 without reference to its typical Stoic connotations, as filtered through the medium of Jewish monotheism. If that is correct, the association of *physis* in Rom 1:26–27 with some notion of ideal universal norms, however ill-defined, cannot be dismissed.

Boswell's survey of Paul's other usages of *physis* turns up the correct observations that Paul normally does not speak of "nature in the abstract" and that he tends to use the word "nature" to refer to "the character of some person or group of persons, a character which was largely ethnic and entirely human." A good example that Boswell does not cite is Gal 2: 15: "We who are Jews by nature (*physei*) and not Gentile sinners. . . ." Here *physei* might well be translated, as it is in the RSV, in accordance with the etymology of the word, as "by birth." The significance of Boswell's observations about Paul's usage elsewhere, however, is diminished by several factors. (a) In the instances where *physis* appears to refer to "the personal nature" of someone, the word typically appears in an anarthrous dative singular form (as in the above example), where it actually functions in a quasi-adverbial manner (on Rom 2: 14 see Achtemeier, 1984: 255–59); its nominal character is largely dissipated in this construction. (b) More importantly, in Rom 1: 26 the noun *physis* occurs in a stereotyped phrase (*para physin*) within a block of material whose formulation is heavily conditioned by traditional language, the language of Hellenistic Jewish polemic against Gentiles; thus, it would not be surprising to find terms used here in a sense not characteristically "Pauline." That is precisely the sort of criterion that enables scholars to identify units of "pre-Pauline" tradition within Paul's letters. (c) Finally, even if we grant the point that *physis* in Rom 1: 26 signifies the proper character of an individual rather than a universal moral order, it is by no means clear that Boswell's conclusions follow. In light of Boswell's preferred interpretation of *physis*, we would have to interpret Paul as follows: homosexual acts are condemned as *para physin* not because they violate some immutable general law, but because they entail a violation of the created nature of the persons in question. It is against the "nature" of the female to have sexual relations with another female, and it is against the "nature" of the male to have sexual relations with another male. That is a perfectly plausible reading of the text, but it is still a very long way from the conclusion that Boswell is seeking to reach.

3.1.2 The Meaning of 'Para.' More problematical than his handling of *physis* is Boswell's brief and tendentious treatment of the preposition *para*. *Para* (with the accusative) in the NT, notes Boswell (1980: 111–12, especially n. 69), usually means not "in opposition to" but "more than, in excess of." On that basis, he contends that *para physin* in Rom 1: 26 should be understood to mean "beyond nature" rather than "against nature." What reply is to be made to this argument?

Anyone with access to a lexicon or a concordance can immediately confirm the truth of Boswell's point about the meaning of *para* with the accusative in the majority of instances. At the same time, however, another truth will come to light: there are a number of cases, smaller in number but entirely clear, where *para* does mean "against" or "contrary to." For example, in Acts 18: 13 Paul's accusers complain that he "is persuading people to wor-

ship God contrary to the Law" (*para ton nomon*). Another example, the more telling for its occurrence within Romans, is to be found in Rom 16: 17: "... take note of those who create dissensions and difficulties, in opposition to the doctrine (*para tēn didachēn*) which you have been taught." Even if someone wanted to argue that in these examples *para* retains its meaning of "beyond," the point would stand that the act of "going beyond" the Law or the correct doctrine is given a clearly pejorative connotation. (Cf. the function of *para* as a prepositional prefix in compounds such as *parabasis* ["transgression"], *paranomia* ["lawlessness"], and *paraptōma* ["false step, sin"].) This usage is not limited to the NT, of course: a glance at Liddell and Scott will show that *para* has a similar meaning in a number of common Greek phrases: *para to dikaion* ("contrary to what is just"), *para elpida* ("contrary to what was hoped"), *para doxan* ("contrary to expectation/opinion"), and of course *para physin*.

In a footnote, Boswell (1980: 111–12) acknowledges that "in certain stock phrases such as *para doxan* 'contrary to' may be the best rendering of *para* with the accusative." Indeed. The point, of course, is that *para physin* is precisely such a stock phrase, but Boswell gives no hint of this fact to his readers. Whether intentionally or not, he leaves the impression that Paul's turn of phrase ought to be interpreted in light of various other Pauline constructions using the preposition *para*, without reference to the occurrence of the stereotypical *para physin* throughout Hellenistic philosophy and literature. At this point Boswell's enthusiasm for his case has apparently overcome his better judgment. *Para* in Rom 1: 26 means exactly what it means in every other occurrence of the phrase *para physin* in Hellenistic texts: "contrary to."¹⁰

But what about Rom 11: 24, where Paul says that God acted *para physin* in "grafting" the Gentiles onto the "cultivated olive tree" of Israel? Does this instance not prove that *para physin* carries no necessary connotation of "moral turpitude" (Boswell, 1980: 112)? It does in fact prove that point, an observation to which we must return in a moment. It does *not*, however, prove that *para* in this construction means anything other than "contrary to." Once again, a careful consideration of the context is necessary. Paul is arguing that God's amazing designs for redeeming humanity have led to a temporary situation in which many Jews, the rightful heirs of God's promises, have rejected the Gospel while the Gentiles, outsiders, are flocking to receive the blessings of salvation. From a Jewish Christian perspective this is a thoroughly scandalous state of affairs. In an attempt to account for it (and simultaneously to head off any tendency for the Gentile Christians to disparage Jews who do not accept the Gospel—cf. Rom 11: 17–32) Paul offers the metaphor of the wild olive branch (the Gentiles) being grafted onto a cultivated olive tree, from which some branches have been broken off in order to make the grafting procedure possible. In the context of this horticultural metaphor, the expressions *kata physin* and *para physin* occur once again. The Gentiles are cut from "a

naturally (*kata physin*) wild olive tree" and "grafted, contrary to nature (*para physin*), into a cultivated olive tree." The use of the "nature" terminology is primarily governed by the metaphor: the grafting procedure is artificial rather than natural. At the same time, the metaphor plays secondarily upon the negative connotations of *para physin*: God's action in incorporating Gentiles, who are "by nature" strangers to the promises, is a stunning manifestation of the offensive paradox of grace, a scandalous but gracious act of righteousness by the God who "justifies the ungodly" (cf. Rom 4:5). So Paul argues.

What can we conclude? Primarily this: the meaning of *para physin* is significantly determined by contextual considerations. The phrase does not by itself mean "immoral." In a discussion of horticultural practice, it can have the relatively neutral meaning of "artificial," though in the particular case of Romans 11:17–24 Paul artfully plays this meaning in counterpoint with the phrase's lingering connotations of unseemliness. In Romans 1:26, however, it is precisely the context which insures that sexual acts "contrary to nature" are given a negative moral evaluation. This argumentative context cannot be explained away by a lexical *tour de force*.

Boswell's discussion of the expression *para physin* does, however, establish one point which should not be neglected. The expression "contrary to nature" probably did not carry for Paul and his readers the vehement connotation of "monstrous abomination" which it subsequently acquired in Western thought about homosexuality. Consequently, this phrase should certainly not be adduced as if it were a biblical warrant for the frantic homophobia which sometimes prevails in modern society.

3.2 "Sexual Orientation" in Romans?

Perhaps the most crucial and controversial of Boswell's exegetical moves lies in his assertion (1980: 112–13) that Paul's derogation of homosexual behavior in Romans 1 applies only to homosexual acts committed by "heterosexual persons":

It cannot be inferred from this that Paul considered mere homoerotic attraction or practice morally reprehensible, since the passage strongly implies that he was not discussing persons who were by inclination gay and since he carefully observed, in regard to both the women and the men, that they changed or abandoned the "natural use" to engage in homosexual activities.

Of all Boswell's reflections on the NT evidence, this is the one that seems to be most often repeated in the heated contemporary discussion of homosexuality in the church. It is also the observation which most vigorously promotes the confusion, to which I referred in my opening comments, between exegesis and hermeneutics, and it is therefore the point at which Boswell's treatment of Romans must be most vigorously challenged.

First of all, Boswell's remarks presuppose that Paul is describing some specifiable group of heterosexually-oriented individuals whose personal life pilgrimage has led them beyond heterosexual activity into promiscuous homosexual behavior. As I have attempted to show in my exegetical remarks on the passage, however, Paul has no such thing in mind. He is not presenting biographical sketches of individual pagans; he is offering an apocalyptic "long view" which indicts fallen humanity as a whole. Certainly Paul does not think that each and every pagan Gentile has made a personal decision at some point in his or her individual history to renounce the God of Israel and to worship idols instead! The "exchange" of truth for a lie to which Paul refers in Rom 1:18-25 is a mythico-historical event in which the whole pagan world is implicated. This "exchange" continues to find universal manifestation in the moral failings which beset human society, as exemplified by the illustrations given in 1:26-32.

In the same way, the charge that these fallen humans have "exchanged natural relations for unnatural" means nothing more nor less than that human beings, created for heterosexual companionship as the Genesis story bears witness, have distorted even so basic a truth as their sexual identity by rejecting the male and female roles which are "naturally" theirs in God's created order. The charge is a corporate indictment of pagan society, not a narrative about the "rake's progress" of particular individuals. Boswell's misinterpretation of this passage shares with much of the history of Western interpretation of Paul an unfortunate tendency to suppose that Paul is primarily concerned with developing a soteriological account of the fate of individuals before God. (For a corrective, see the provocative essays of Stendahl, 1976.)

Thus, Boswell's proposal already runs aground when we recognize that the passage has no intention of discussing the developmental history of individuals. But his proposal falls apart completely *as exegesis of Paul* when we recognize that the whole conception of "sexual orientation" is an anachronism when applied to this text. The idea that some individuals have an inherent disposition towards same-sex erotic attraction and are therefore constitutionally "gay" is a modern idea of which there is no trace either in the NT or in any other Jewish or Christian writings in the ancient world. As the quotations from Dio Chrysostom and Philo in part 2.3.2 of this essay illustrate, the usual supposition of writers during the Hellenistic period was that homosexual behavior was the result of insatiable lust seeking novel and more challenging forms of self-gratification. (Certainly Boswell's own account [1980: 61-87] of the sexual virtuosity of Greco-Roman society suggests that sexual switch-hitting was extremely common, certainly far more common than exclusive homoerotic practice.) As Furnish (1979: 66) comments after surveying the evidence, "The ancient writers were operating without the vaguest conception of what we have learned to call 'sexual orientation.'"

In view of this situation, to suggest that Paul intends to condemn homo-

sexual acts only when they are committed by persons who are constitutionally heterosexual is to introduce a distinction entirely foreign to Paul's thought-world and then to insist that the distinction is fundamental to Paul's position. It is, in short, a textbook case of "eisegesis," the fallacy of reading one's own agenda into a text. Boswell (1980: 109), perhaps sensing the problem, writes a muddled and equivocal paragraph which first hedges but then reasserts his stance:

... It is not clear that Paul distinguished in his thoughts or writings between gay persons (in the sense of permanent sexual preference) and heterosexuals who simply engaged in periodic homosexual behavior. It is in fact unlikely that many Jews of his day recognized such a distinction, but it is quite apparent that—whether or not he was aware of their existence—Paul did not discuss gay *persons* but only homosexual *acts* committed by heterosexual persons.

If Paul did not make such a distinction himself, how can it be maintained that Rom 1:26–27 strictly observes the distinction?

Much more clear-headed is the approach of Derrick Sherwin Bailey (1955: 38), whose *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*, a work notable for its careful efforts to minimize the impact of various biblical references to homosexual practice, freely concedes that the Romans text cannot be sidestepped in this fashion.

The Bible knows nothing of inversion as an inherited trait, or an inherent condition due to psychological or glandular causes, and consequently regards all homosexual practice as evidence of perversion. Hence the phrase in Rom i.27: "... leaving (*aphentes*) the natural use of the woman . . .," cannot be interpreted as a reference only to the practice of heterosexual males who have abandoned themselves to the illicit satisfactions of homosexual coitus—thus appearing to withhold condemnation from the mutual indulgences of genuine inverts. . . . St. Paul's words can only be understood in the sense which he himself would have attached to them, without introducing distinctions which he did not intend, and which would have been unintelligible to him.

Boswell goes astray here partly because of his erroneous reading of Paul's "exchange" language and partly because of his eagerness to deny that the passage would have been read within early Christianity as an unqualified condemnation of all homosexual behavior.

More startling still is Boswell's effort (1980: 109, 117) to enlist John Chrysostom as a witness for his interpretation. The whole point of Chrysostom's comments on the Romans passage, which Boswell cites both in his text and in an appendix, is to rule out of court precisely the argument that Boswell makes. If indeed "the idea that homosexuality represented a congenital physical characteristic" was "well known to Chrysostom," as Boswell suggests, Chrysostom's remarks (as cited in Boswell's own translation [1980: 360–61]) must be read as a vigorous polemic against such an idea:

He says not that they had fallen in love and were drawn to each other by passion but that they "burned in their lust for each other." You can see that all such desire stems from a greed which will not remain within its usual bounds.

Chrysostom is not carefully distinguishing between two different types of homoerotic behavior, acceptable and unacceptable, as Boswell implies; he is insisting that *all* homosexual activity "stems from a greed which will not remain within its usual bounds," and he is explicitly arguing that Paul's statements deprive those who would seek to justify such activity of any possible excuse for what Chrysostom, within the same passage, stigmatizes as a sin worse than fornication or even murder. One is left wondering what an ancient writer could possibly have said to avoid being coopted in the service of Boswell's hypothesis.

3.3 *The Credibility of Boswell's Historical Reconstruction*

The preceding remarks suggest a question which must at least be raised, though this essay cannot pursue it: how sound is Boswell's treatment of the *historical* evidence concerning early Christian attitudes towards homosexuality? He summarizes his reconstruction in the following manner (1980: 135):

Not only does there appear to have been no general prejudice against gay people among early Christians; there does not seem to have been any reason for Christianity to adopt a hostile attitude toward homosexual behavior.

In point of fact, however, every pertinent Christian text from the pre-Constantinian period (Romans, the Epistle of Barnabas, the Testament of Naphtali [if this is indeed a Christian text], the *Apostolic Constitutions*, Clement of Alexandria, Minucius Felix, etc.) adopts an unremittingly negative judgment on homosexual practice, and this tradition is emphatically carried forward by all major Christian writers of the fourth and fifth centuries (Chrysostom, Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, *et al.*). A critical reading of Boswell's own discussion will confirm the point: he is unable to cite a single early Christian text which approves homosexual activity. The two anecdotal examples that he does present (Boswell, 1980: 133–35) of "love relationships" between members of the same sex (the relationship between Ausonius and Paulinus of Nola and the story of the martyred saints Perpetua and Felicitas) do not, as he admits, actually provide evidence of a sexual relationship between the parties in question.

How, then, can Boswell put forward an account which claims that early Christians were tolerant of "gay" sexuality? The argument rests on two types of appeal: the argument from silence and the claim that the *reasons* advanced by early Christian writers for rejecting homosexuality are in fact insufficient or invalid. Let us consider each of these briefly in turn.

The argument from silence derives whatever plausibility it may possess

from the fact that early Christian references to homosexuality are relatively infrequent, despite the prevalence of homosexual practices in the Greco-Roman world. If Christians had really been opposed to homosexuality and if Christian self-definition entailed sharp distinction from common pagan practice in this matter, would we not hear a good deal more about it?¹¹

This argument does indeed rightly call our attention to the fact that homosexual behavior is not a major issue for early Christian writers, particularly the writers of the NT. It is fallacious, however, to infer from this that they were tolerant of it. On the contrary, the evidence that *does* exist suggests that they regarded it as so self-evidently loathsome as hardly to require discussion. This attitude appears to be one which the early church inherited from its Jewish wellsprings. (In addition to the prohibition of homosexual intercourse in Leviticus, see the above discussion of Josephus and Philo.) As Boswell puzzles over the "source" of "antigay prejudices" in the Christian tradition, he seems to give all too little weight to the early influence of Jewish tradition on this matter. The early Christian texts which decry homosexual practice do so, as we have already noted, in terms which are directly dependent upon Jewish polemic against pagan vices. It appears that the early Christians unreflectively adopted and baptized the characteristic Hellenistic Jewish hostility towards homosexuality. It is perfectly legitimate for the historian to wonder, as Boswell (1980: 102-03) does, why such a taboo would be retained in early Christian communities which set aside many other Jewish scruples such as dietary laws and the practice of circumcision; however, it is entirely illegitimate to suppose that opposition to homosexual activity must therefore have arisen from some other source or, worse yet, that it did not exist at all simply because it appears to the modern historian to be illogical.

The most grievous and pervasive error in Boswell's historical reconstruction of early Christian attitudes towards homosexuality is his tendency to confuse normative with descriptive judgments. If he can show that the arguments of early Christian writers were "inconsistent, contradictory, and often illogical" (as indeed often they were), he supposes (Boswell, 1980: 128) that such arguments must therefore have had little influence on "the general attitude toward homosexuality among rank-and-file Christians." But where is the evidence, particularly for the pre-Constantinian period? When Boswell tries to dismiss the weight of the literary evidence by asserting that "there is . . . no evidence that Christians in general were much affected by the narrow sexual attitudes of some of their leaders," we might, with all good will, ask where is the evidence that they were *not* so affected?¹² Boswell's recurrent strategy is to discredit the *logical* validity of early Christian polemics against homosexual practice, or to show that antecedent philosophical traditions such as Stoicism did not necessitate a rejection of homosexuality, and then to dismiss these texts as *historically* valid evidence for determining what early Christian attitudes actually were. The formulation quoted at the beginning of this

section is revealing: "there does not seem to have been any *reason* for Christianity to adopt a hostile attitude toward homosexual behavior." Be that as it may, such an assertion must weigh lightly on the historian's scale against the considerable body of evidence which demonstrates that early Christian writers did *in fact* hold a unanimously hostile attitude toward homosexual behavior. Boswell is able to tell a story of early Christian tolerance towards homosexuality only within an artificial silence created by gagging his sources with a sheet of normative judgments.

In one sense, my remarks in the last two paragraphs go beyond the immediate concerns with which this essay began. I am sure, for the reasons given above, that Boswell's exegesis of Romans 1:26-27 is in error; I am strongly suspicious that his historical construction may be equally mistaken, but that is more difficult to assess. In any case, the clear condemnation of homosexual activity in Romans 1 must be taken fully into account in any sketch of early Christian attitudes towards homosexuality.

4. THE NORMATIVE QUESTION: THE USE OF ROMANS 1 IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS

In view of the foregoing exegetical observations on Romans 1, how should the text be brought to bear upon our modern controversies surrounding the morality of homosexual practices, both in society at large and in the church? A full answer to that question would demand an essay much longer than this one, but certain comments are in order here. My concluding remarks will center upon the relevance of this key New Testament text for normative judgments within Christian ethics.

Although Boswell in his preface (1980: xv) forswears any attempt to speak directly to the modern situation, his work addresses questions that are of inescapable importance for anyone in the Christian tradition trying to think seriously about homosexuality as a moral issue. Boswell's purpose may have been limited to the task of historical reconstruction, but his arguments have understandably been drafted immediately into the service of moral argument within the church. (Of course, Boswell can hardly be held responsible for all the uses that others may have made of his work.) Despite his initial disclaimer, it is hard to believe that pressing contemporary issues have not influenced his handling of his material. Indeed, as I have tried to show, his treatment of Rom 1:26-27 founders precisely because he scrutinizes the text through the hermeneutical lenses of modern categories alien to the first-century historical setting. This procedure yields an anachronistic reading which neutralizes the force of Romans 1:26-27 as a warrant against homosexual behavior. Consequently, Boswell is able to conclude (1980: 117) that "the New Testament takes no demonstrable position on homosexuality."

Although this reading may appear congenial to those who champion the church's acceptance and ordination of homosexuals, it would be a grave error for anyone to build on the exegetical foundation that Boswell has laid. It would be far wiser and more honest to acknowledge that on this question Paul stands with the opposition. In Romans 1:26–27 we find an unambiguous indictment of homosexual behavior as a violation of God's intention for humanity.

What then? Does that settle the contemporary issue? By no means. This is precisely the point at which genuinely fruitful reflection must begin. Given the fact that Paul, in common with every other early Christian writer who addressed the issue, apparently regarded all homosexual activity as immoral, we still have to decide how to construe the authority of his opinion in the present time. Because there remain open questions about precisely *how* the Bible functions as an authority for normative ethical judgments, we cannot relieve ourselves of the responsibility for moral decision by appealing to the plain sense of a single proof-text; nor, on the other hand, should we feel constrained to force Paul, through exegetical contortions, to say what we think he ought to have said. We must let the text have its say, whether for us or against us; then we must decide what obedience to God requires.

The principle seems simple enough. There are NT texts which teach unambiguously that Christians should not offer physical resistance to evil (Matt 5:38–41, Rom 12:19), that women are not allowed to teach or have authority over men (1 Tim 2:11–12), that women must wear veils on their heads (1 Cor 11:2–16), and that Christians should wash one another's feet (John 13:14–15). In none of these cases is there any reasonable doubt about the meaning of the text (though there is, of course, a great deal of doubt about the reasons given for the veil-wearing); in each of these cases, however, Christians have historically been divided, to one degree or another, about whether or how these commands establish binding norms for the life and conduct of the Christian community. The debate turns on questions concerning the *appropriation* of the biblical teachings in later historical settings. The situation is no different in the case of Romans 1. There is no doubt that Paul condemns homosexual practice. We must determine, however, what normative force that condemnation carries in shaping our vision of a life lived faithfully before God.

When we ask how any Biblical text is to function in shaping our ethical deliberations, there are at least two different sorts of questions that must be explored:

1. What is the mode or level of discourse in which the text may appropriately function as a source of appeal for normative judgments?
2. How is the text to be coordinated with or weighed against other authorities?

Let us examine these questions in turn as they bear upon the appropriation of Romans 1 in contemporary discussions of sexual ethics.

4.1 Mode of Discourse: How Does Romans 1 Address the Issue?

Building upon the categories proposed in James Gustafson's important article on "The Place of Scripture in Christian Ethics" (1970; cf. also Verhey, 1984: 153–97), I would suggest that there are at least five different modes in which a particular text may function as an authority for ethical discourse. The text may serve as a source for: (1) moral law; (2) principles or ideals; (3) analogies to contemporary experience; (4) understanding of the world and humankind; (5) understanding of God. (The last two modes correspond roughly to what Gustafson calls "the theological use" of Scripture in ethics.) In which of these modes may Romans 1 appropriately be adduced?

(1) *Moral Law*. Although Paul no doubt presupposes the Scriptural proscription of homosexual acts (Lev 18:22, 20:13; there may be an allusion to the latter text in Rom 1:32), he neither repeats it nor issues any new rules on the subject. Consequently, no direct appeal to Romans 1 as a source for laws about sexual conduct is possible. Indeed, in view of the wider framework of Paul's discussion of the normative role of Law in the Christian life, any such appeal would be intensely problematical; there is a rueful irony in the persistent tendency of the Christian tradition—evident already in the Pastoral Epistles—to venerate Paul as the promulgator of a *nova lex*.

(2) *Principles*. From Romans 1, one could properly infer the principle that human actions ought to acknowledge and honor God as creator. Such a principle, however, is too general to provide concrete ethical norms. The application of the principle is dependent upon a series of more particular discernments about God's order of creation and about the way in which human actions should appropriately respond to that order.

(3) *Analogy*. Analogy more readily develops from narrative texts than from explicitly theological discourse. It is not easy to see how a declamatory passage such as Romans 1 could serve as a source of precedents pertinent to our issue, unless one located the point of analogy in the pervasive corruption of human society then and now. This way of framing the analogy begs the question, however, with relation to the issue of homosexuality, where an important part of the dispute centers precisely on the question of whether contemporary homosexual relationships really are analogous to those that Paul knew about. In any case, the absence of methodological controls on the imaginative act of formulating analogies renders it difficult to ground normative claims in this mode of discourse (cf. Gustafson, 1970: 442–43), and Romans 1 does not lend itself naturally to this use.

(4) *Understanding of the World and Humankind*. This is the mode in which Romans 1 speaks: it offers an analysis of humankind in rebellion against

God and consequently plunged into depravity and confusion. In the course of the analysis, homosexual activities are—explicitly and without qualification—identified as symptomatic of that tragically confused rebellion. Thus, it is possible and methodologically appropriate to take Paul's account, both in general and with regard to its particulars, as "revealed reality": an authoritative depiction of the human condition. The text then would inform a normative evaluation of homosexual practice as a distortion of God's order for creation.

(5) *Understanding of God.* Romans 1 holds abundant resources for informing our understanding of God: God is a righteous God who creates human beings for obedience to his purposes, grants them the freedom to rebel, stands in righteous judgment of their rebellion, and manifests his "wrath" by allowing them to suffer the just consequences of their sin.¹³ (Of course, this depiction of God must be held in balance with the portrayal, developed at length elsewhere in Romans, of God as a righteous merciful God whose righteousness is revealed preeminently in his act of deliverance through Jesus Christ.) In contrast to other NT texts which present the character of God as a pattern for human emulation (cf. Matt 5:43–48), the understanding of God in Romans 1 offers for moral reflection not primarily a source of concrete norms but rather a ground of motivation for ethical action.

Thus, Romans 1 confronts us with an account of how the ordering of human life before God has gone awry. To use the text appropriately in ethical reflection about homosexuality, we should not try to wring laws or principles or analogies out of it. If Romans 1 is to function appropriately to inform normative ethical judgments about homosexuality, it must function as a diagnostic tool, laying bare the truth about humankind's dishonorable "exchange" of the natural for the unnatural: according to Paul, homosexual relations, however they may be interpreted (or rationalized—cf. Rom 1:32) by fallen and confused creatures, represent a tragic distortion of the created order. (Obviously, this judgment leaves open many questions about how best to deal with the problem pastorally.) Do we grant the normative force of Paul's analysis? That is the final question to which we must turn.

4.2 Other Authorities?

Even after we have gotten clear about what the text says and about the mode in which it presents normative claims, one crucial question remains: is the authority of Romans 1:26–27 in some way qualified or counterbalanced by other relevant authorities? A full discussion of other possible sources of authority is far beyond the scope of this essay, but they may be summarized for the sake of convenience under the headings of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. The following discussion will seek to indicate briefly how each of these other sources of authority might relate to the perspective on homosexual relations expressed in Romans 1.

(1) *Scripture*. Are there other biblical texts which speak against Paul to justify the morality of homosexual relationships? On issues where the canon of Scripture reflects a diversity of perspectives, it surely engenders and probably authorizes a diversity of practices and opinions within the church. In this particular case, however, the witness of Scripture is univocal. Although homosexuality is a minor concern of the biblical authors, every explicit reference to homosexual practices is pejorative in character. Those who seek positive Scriptural justification for homosexual relations can appeal to the Bible only for principles ("All our actions should be guided by love") or analogies ("Just as the early church accepted Gentiles into fellowship, so we too should accept homosexuals"); on the other hand, those who oppose the normative acceptance of homosexual relations appeal to explicit laws (Lev 18: 22, 20: 13) and to Paul's evaluation of the human condition. Because these appeals to Scripture are made in divergent modes of ethical argumentation, the two sides tend to talk past each other fruitlessly. Whatever one may decide about the weight of the appeal to the love-principle, however, the fact remains that no biblical text directly contradicts the authority of Paul's teaching on this matter.¹⁴

(2) *Tradition*. How has the Christian theological tradition interpreted Paul's negative judgment on homosexual relations? Does the tradition in some way qualify or counterbalance Paul's perspective? As Boswell's study amply documents, the mainstream of Christian ethical teaching has been relentlessly hostile to homosexual practice; it is extremely difficult to find in the tradition any firm point of leverage against Paul on this issue. If anything, the tempering influence works the other way around: by placing homosexual acts in a theological context as just one manifestation of humankind's universal alienation from God, Romans 1 ought to serve as a check on the tradition's tendency to stigmatize homosexuals as specially despicable sinners.

(3) *Reason*. Under this rubric should be included the large body of modern psychological and scientific studies of the phenomenon of homosexuality, which demonstrate the widespread incidence of homosexual activity and suggest that homosexual preference is for many individuals an innate disposition. Have such empirical studies in "modern sexology" actually placed us, as George R. Edwards (1984: 13-23) contends, in "a new hermeneutical situation"?¹⁵ Studies of this kind do provide the clearest argument against the authority of Romans 1 on the question of homosexuality, because they confront Paul head-on in the same mode of reflection, posing an alternative to his account of the "natural" order of creation. We should take care, however, to avoid confusing the descriptive findings of empirical studies with the value judgments that are often attached to them, value judgments which sometimes rather abruptly derive an "ought" from an "is." Paul, if confronted by a study demonstrating that (say) ten percent of the population favor sexual partners of the same gender, would no doubt regard it as corroborative evidence for his proclamation that the wrath of God is being made manifest in rampant

human unrighteousness. Are there studies that purport to show that homosexual preference is a result of involuntary "orientation" rather than of free choice? It must be remembered that Romans 1:26-27 cannot be read as an account of how individuals become homosexuals. Given his understanding of sin as a power that holds humanity in bondage, Paul might well reply wearily to such studies, "I have already charged that all . . . are under the power of sin" (Rom 3:9). Paul's condemnation of homosexual activity does not rest upon an assumption that it is freely chosen; indeed, it is precisely characteristic of Paul to regard "sin" as a condition of human existence, a condition which robs us of free volition and drives us to disobedient actions which, though involuntary, are nonetheless culpable (see especially Rom 7: 13-25). That is what it means to live "in the flesh" in a fallen creation. The gulf is wide between Paul's viewpoint and the modern habit of assigning culpability only for actions assumed to be under free control of the agent. In any case, a *moral* evaluation of homosexual behavior cannot be derived directly from studies of statistical incidence or of causal factors. Scientific investigations cannot provide a *refutation* of Paul's statements; nevertheless, it is clear that "reason," in contrast to Scripture and tradition, does provide arguments that may be *counterposed* to the authority of Paul's judgment.

(4) *Experience*. "Experience" is notoriously difficult to employ as an authority for theological formulations. Whose "experience" counts, and where do we derive the categories for describing and evaluating the experience? Nonetheless, the experience of some Christians in our time surely may function at least to raise questions about the authoritative role of Scripture and tradition in our deliberations about the morality of homosexual relations. If there are individuals who live in stable loving homosexual relationships and claim to experience the grace—rather than the wrath—of God therein, how are such claims to be assessed? Was Paul wrong? Or are such experiential claims simply another manifestation of the blindness and self-deception that Paul so chillingly describes? Or, beside these irreconcilable alternatives, could we entertain the possible emergence of new realities that Paul could not have anticipated? Could God be doing a new thing in our time? (Cf. Johnson, 1983:95-97.) Does the practice that Paul condemns correspond exactly to the phenomenon of homosexuality that exists in the present? If not, does the authority of present experience eclipse the authority of Paul's understanding of God's intention for human sexual relationships? These are the sorts of questions that we must grapple with as we seek to assess the place of Romans 1:16-32 in shaping normative judgments about sexual ethics.

4.3 Conclusion

In light of the above discussion, my critique of Boswell may be expressed more precisely. Rather than recognizing that contemporary understandings of homosexuality might pose a fundamental challenge to the authority of

Paul's teaching in Romans 1 (or vice-versa), he smuggles modern categories back into the first-century text and thus glosses over the potential conflict between differing authorities. To assert, as Boswell does, that Paul's words in Rom 1:26–27 refer only to "homosexual acts committed by heterosexual persons" is to commit a foolish anachronism, harmonizing the difference between the text and Boswell's own viewpoint and thus obscuring the real hermeneutical task, which comes into view only when the possibility of collision between worldviews is entertained. That is why Boswell's arguments are particularly useful to conservative evangelical apologists for homosexuality (such as Scanzoni and Mollenkott, 1978): he never questions the truth or authority of Scripture. Instead, through an interpretive *tour de force*, he finds "no clear condemnation" of homosexual acts even in a text as explicit as Rom 1:26–27.

Much more clarifying than Boswell's treatment of the NT evidence is the approach of Robin Scroggs (1983: 123–29), who, while acknowledging that the NT (including 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10) does indeed condemn homosexual activity, contends that its teaching cannot be *applied* directly to the contemporary situation because the modern "model" of mutual, non-exploitative, faithful homosexual relationships differs so drastically from the dehumanizing pederastic "model" of homosexuality that prevailed in Hellenistic culture. In his view, the negative judgment of the NT writers applies to the latter model and cannot be transferred to the former. In the end, I am not persuaded by Scroggs' argument. While some of my disagreements with Scroggs turn on his use of the concept of a "model" of homosexuality (can it really be maintained that there is a radical qualitative difference between homosexual practices ancient and modern?), my most fundamental differences with him are exegetical in character. In my opinion, his discussion does not do full justice to Romans 1; he argues that its language is purely conventional and therefore must apply only to pederasty, even though there is no direct indication of this in the text, and he denies – strangely – that Paul intends any allusion to the Genesis creation story. The latter point, on which I think he is clearly incorrect, is a crucial one in the discussion (cf. my treatment of the passage in part 2.2.2, above). Still, Scroggs at least locates the hermeneutical problem where it belongs by respecting the *distance* between us and the text, rather than collapsing this distance artificially. (The same may be said of the similar position of Furnish, 1979: 78–82.)

Certainly any discussion of the normative application of Romans 1 must not neglect the powerful impact of Paul's rhetorical reversal in Rom 2:1: all of us stand "without excuse" (*anapologētos*) before God, Jews and Gentiles alike, heterosexuals and homosexuals alike. Thus, Romans 1 should decisively undercut any self-righteous condemnation of homosexual behavior. Those who follow the church's tradition by upholding the authority of Paul's teaching against the morality of homosexual acts must do so with due humility (cf. the pertinent teaching of Gal 6:1–5).

Likewise, those who decide that the authority of Paul's judgment against homosexuality is finally outweighed by other considerations ought to do so with a due sense of the gravity of their choice. The theological structure in which Paul places his indictment of relations "contrary to nature" is a weighty one indeed, and it is not explicitly counterbalanced by anything in Scripture or in Christian tradition. Arguments in favor of acceptance of homosexual relations find their strongest warrants in empirical investigations and in contemporary experience. Those who defend the morality of homosexual relationships within the church may do so only by conferring upon these warrants an authority greater than the direct authority of Scripture and tradition, at least with respect to this question.

Only when the issue is posed in these terms does the painful difficulty of the decision become clear. Boswell's interpretation of Rom 1:26-27, inadvertently blurring the distinction between exegesis and hermeneutics, falsifies the choice by making it appear too easy. We must forthrightly recognize that in Romans 1 Paul portrays homosexual activity as a vivid and shameful sign of humanity's confusion and rebellion against God; then we must form our moral choices soberly in light of that portrayal.

NOTES

1. Boswell's lecture, delivered on October 7, 1983, was part of a series of lectures on "Homosexuality and the Church," sponsored by the Yale Divinity School Gay/Straight Coalition.

2. Boswell's detailed discussion of this problem is now superseded by the convincing proposal of Robin Scroggs (1983: 106-08), who suggests that the peculiar term *arsenokoitês* must be understood as a literalistic Greek translation of the Hebrew expression *mishkav zakur* ("lying with a male"), derived directly from Leviticus 18:22, 20:13 and used in rabbinic texts to refer to homosexuality. This proposal, if correct, cuts the ground out from under much of Boswell's lexicographical argument.

3. Boswell's influence was particularly important in shaping the discussion of biblical texts in John J. McNeill, S.J. (1976). Though his book appeared in print four years earlier than *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, McNeill explicitly acknowledged his dependence on Boswell's then unpublished research, describing it as one of his "principal sources" (p. 200, n. 39). McNeill in turn received a great deal of attention in the theological community and influenced the exegetical work of other writers such as James B. Nelson (1978) and Letha Scanzoni and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott (1978). Since the publication of Boswell's book, its arguments have been promulgated in many places.

4. The scope of this essay neither permits nor requires a full defense of my interpretation of "the righteousness of God." Readers interested in pursuing this issue are referred to Hays (1980; 1985) for further discussion and bibliography.

5. A pressing question inevitably arises at this point: if God's wrath produces such results, does it make any sense for God's judgment to fall upon those who are

implicated in the nexus of human unrighteousness? Paul anticipates this objection, of course, and addresses it in Rom 3:5–8 and 9:19–24.

6. Some of the language that Paul uses in 1:23 echoes terminology from Gen 1:26–28: *eikōn* (“image”), *homoiōma* (“likeness”), *peteina* (“birds”), and *herpeta* (“reptiles”). The Genesis text indicates that humankind is made in the image and likeness of God and given dominion over birds, beasts, and reptiles; and irony of Paul’s indictment hinges on recognizing the inversion that has occurred when humans, rather than exercising dominion over these creatures, worship their images. The reference to idolatry is also underscored by the allusion to Psalm 106:20 (LXX 105:20): *kai ěllaxanto tēn doxan autōn en homoiōmati moschou esthontos chorton* (“and they changed their glory for the likeness of a calf that eats grass”). Paul’s description of Gentile idolatry thus achieves a “double exposure” effect: humanity’s turning away from God is both a reversal of the order of creation *and* a recapitulation of Israel’s unfaithfulness in the wilderness.

7. Incidentally, the use of the term “abominations” (*bdelygmata*) in this text—the same word used by the LXX to translate *toevah* in the Levitical holiness code (cf. Lev. 18:22, 20:13)—demonstrates unmistakably that the term could be applied by a Hellenistic Jewish writer to transgressions of the Gentiles. This fact surely places a significant question mark over Boswell’s contention (1980: 100–102) that the term “abomination” in the OT holiness code refers only to violations of the prescriptions of ritual purity which were “symbols of Jewish distinctiveness” and therefore binding only on Jews. Perhaps in its origins the term had this limited cultic sense, but over time the word extended its semantic range to include all behavior regarded as abhorrent to God (cf. the frequent use of the term in this more general sense in Proverbs and other Wisdom literature.) Wisdom 12:23 shows that it was entirely possible for Jews to accuse Gentiles of committing “abominations.” A quick survey of a concordance turns up at least eleven other instances of this usage of *toevah*/*bdelugma* in the OT: Deut 12:31; 18:9, 12; 20:18; 1 Kgs 14:24; 2 Kgs 16:3; 21:2; 2 Chr 28:3; 33:2; 36:14; Isa 44:19.

8. It is not easy to see how this assertion squares with Boswell’s own recognition (1980: 108) that “it is clear that the sexual behavior itself is objectionable to Paul, not merely its associations.”

9. It is tempting to speculate that the expression “law of nature” was coined by Philo (or within the Alexandrian Hellenistic Judaism that he exemplifies), with his characteristic concern to demonstrate that the dictates of “nature” were perfectly embodied in the Jewish Law. Cf. the quotation from *De Abr.* 135 in part 2.3.2, above.

10. Why does the Greek idiom favor *para physin* over a construction employing *kata* with the genitive? Perhaps the former construction affords a clearer contrast to *kata physin* than would the expression *kata physeōs* (“against nature”), which seems never to occur.

11. An interesting counterpoint to Boswell’s presentation is offered by Furnish (1979: 52–83), who contends that by the first century C. E. there was an emerging consensus not only among Jews and Christians but also among popular moral philosophers that homosexual practices were degrading and immoral: “To discerning ethical teachers in the Greco-Roman world it seemed just as obvious that homosexual practices were necessarily exploitative as that they were inevitably born of insatiable lust” (p. 67). Furnish’s point is that Paul’s attitudes were thoroughly shaped by a cultural

environment in which negative moral judgments on homosexuality were taken for granted. (Certainly the offhand character of Paul's references to the topic seems to lend support to Furnish's view.) If that is the case, Boswell's argument from silence loses much of its force; Christians would not need to distinguish their position emphatically from the surrounding culture if they shared with that culture a thoroughgoing disapproval of homosexual behavior. Obviously, the disparate portraits painted by Boswell and Furnish cannot both be correct; a more thorough historical investigation is needed.

12. The one piece of potentially significant evidence that Boswell is able to cite (1980: 131-32) is an excerpt from John Chrysostom's "Against the Opponents of the Monastic Life," in which he complains that homosexuality is rampant even among the Christians in Antioch. Some allowance must be made here for Chrysostom's well-known fondness for homiletical hyperbole; still, there must be some truth in his accusations. If so, what we see here is one of many areas in which Chrysostom is struggling to hold the line on Christian teaching in the face of mass incursions of nominal Christians in the newly "Christianized" empire. This fourth-century situation tells us nothing about the general attitudes of Christians in the pre-Constantinian period.

13. Against Edwards (1984: 85-100) it must be insisted that Romans 1: 16-32 *does* reflect Paul's own understanding of God. Edwards, while correctly noting the rhetorical function of the passage (cf. my discussion in part 2.3.3 of this essay), draws the unwarranted conclusion (p. 86) that "Paul presents in this section not thoughts that proceed from his own understanding of divine justice but those of Jewish tradition. . . ." The dichotomy is both ridiculous and tragic. How long will NT scholarship persist in the pernicious illusion that writers believe only those ideas which they themselves have invented and which have nothing in common with the traditions by which they have been formed? How long will Christian scholars indulge their penchant for playing off the "Christian" understanding of God against the caricatured "fire-and-brimstone God" (Edwards, 1984: 86) of the Old Testament? Edwards finds the idea of God's wrath to be "ridden with problems for contemporary theological reflection," and he believes that it leads to "embarrassing" and "grotesque" theological consequences (1984: 86, 87). Whether that is so readers must judge for themselves; however, let us not suppose that *Paul* could not have believed a number of things that might prove embarrassing to modern theologians such as Tillich and Dodd (cited by Edwards, 1984: 86, 87). In point of fact, the idea of God's wrath and judgment plays a major role in Paul's strongly apocalyptic theology. (For sensible discussions of the continuity of Paul's conception of God with his Jewish heritage, see Dahl, 1977: 178-91; Moxnes, 1980; Bassler, 1982.) Despite Edwards's lame apology that he does not intend his exposition to be "defamatory of Judaism" (1984: 100), his treatment of Romans 1 is essentially Marcionite in character.

14. After the completion of this article, Gerald T. Sheppard published a provocative essay on "The Use of Scripture within the Christian Ethical Debate concerning Same-Sex Oriented Persons" (1985). Although Sheppard initially eschews the temptation to "try to rescue the Bible from its homophobic statements" (1985: 18), he ends up doing precisely that, though with considerable hermeneutical sophistication. Employing a style of "theological exegesis" informed by his own version of "canon-contextual" criticism (1985: 20), he "finds contextual warrants within Scripture itself" for rejecting Paul's theological condemnation of homosexual behavior (1985: 29). Shep-

pard's approach, acknowledging the presence of negative judgments within Scripture on homosexuality, represents an exegetical advance over Boswell. To discuss the appropriateness of his hermeneutical proposals would require another essay. I will restrict my response here to one observation and two questions: (1) In the end, Sheppard openly appeals to contemporary experience (the testimony of the lives and words of homosexual Christians) as the warrant which requires us to set aside "the normative biblical expression" on this question (1985: 30-32). (2) Can a hermeneutic which professes "allegiance to scripture as a canonical witness" (1985: 24) easily sweep aside a text as weighty as Romans 1? (3) How does Sheppard's "canon-contextual" method differ essentially from Bultmannian *Sachkritik*?

15. I would suggest that if we are in a new hermeneutical situation, it is not primarily because we know something that Paul did not know about "sexology"; rather, it is because prevailing social attitudes have changed so that the value-neutral ideal of empirical investigation has tacitly come to acquire near-normative force in the formation of popular moral judgments about sexual behavior.

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