

Romans Revisited

An article by Hendrik Hart

How I came to see Paul's references to homosexuality in a radically new light

Personal stories always affect our approach to the Bible. The changing circumstances and events of our lives bring new understandings. They force us to struggle with issues we once thought settled. They demand that we reread old passages of Scripture with new eyes.

As a philosopher by profession, I have worked at issues related to knowing the truth. In that context, I have always had a deep interest in Scripture. I also believe Christian scholars need to link their biblical criticism to practices which focus on the gospel's witness to peace and justice. Over the years, my own involvement with gay and lesbian Christians has caused me to concentrate on how my theoretical work might bring a perspective of justice and peace to gay and lesbian concerns. As I've focused on the first chapter of Romans – a passage long understood to condemn homosexuality – I have felt compelled to challenge traditional interpretations of this Scripture. I share my findings as a story, because my personal journey and my struggles with the text are intimately bound together.

I first discovered homosexuality to be a concern of Christians in 1947 during a conversation with my father, a minister in the Reformed tradition. He believed the challenge to manage one's sexuality if one were gay called for pastoral respect, and he pointed out to me that his favorite Christian poet was gay.

He said he regarded the Nazi criminalization of homosexuality during World War II – when we lived in Holland – as a reactionary and unchristian move.

That was almost half a century ago, and for the time, my father's views were quite progressive. Although he saw homosexual activity as sinful, neither he nor my mother ever spoke disapprovingly in my presence of my gay uncle's life with a partner.

I experienced several incidents in my youth where men tried to abuse me sexually, but these experiences did not lead me to equate homosexuality with sexual abuse. Nor did they change the generally positive attitude toward homosexuals which my father had taught me. I felt well prepared to accept and listen sympathetically when, in 1967, gay Christian poet Albert Gedraitis came out to me and told of his agonies as a gay man and a follower of Christ persecuted by other followers. Albert, who had just left a leadership role in a very conservative organization, brought alive for me the immensity of the struggle for gay Christians.

Nothing so dramatized the conflict for me as my participation in a (never aired) television program about homosexuality done by a Toronto station in the early seventies. I was to represent orthodox Christianity; also in the group was a representative of Canada's equivalent of the John Birch Society. I was about to say something when he first spoke his mind.

I have forgotten his words. It was twenty years ago, after all. But I shall never forget his vitriolic outrage. The invective this man poured out on gay members of the panel was so hateful, so graphic, so destructive, that to write about it even now makes me feel like crying.

Till then, I had *thought* a lot about homosexuality. But this John Bircher got into my *heart*, the place where Scripture tells us the issues of life and death are decided. My heart pounded wildly; my whole being screamed. I realized my heart was with those who were being attacked.

When asked to say something, I was struck dumb. Too much pain for my lips. Just this uncontrollably racing heart. I felt an urge to jump between the John Bircher and those he was persecuting. I knew this energy, directed at eradicating homosexuality, was murderous, evil, and un-Christlike.

I feared that I would be expected to side with this man, though perhaps more gently. Yet I knew with certainty this would be a betrayal of my Lord. I was in agony.

After the taping, a technician joked that the “speechless goddam theologian” was the best part of the show. But to me it was no laughing matter. Hours later, my heart had still had not come to rest. My heart, moulded by God-fearing parents and a Christian Reformed Church upbringing, educated at Christian schools from nursery school through my Ph.D., nurtured by Bible study and employment at the Institute for Christian Studies, had instructed me that God in Christ required my solidarity with brothers and sisters vulnerable to the most evil forms of rejection.

That same attitude again brought me near desperation when a decade later my own Christian institution dismissed one of my colleagues after his struggle with his own sexual identity became known. The shameful bathhouse raids in Toronto at that same time further convinced me that I must embody God’s love for these whom much of the church despises.

This transformation of my heart brought me again to the Scriptures, which have always played an immense role in helping me evaluate my relationships with those around me. I began to ask myself how this attitude of my heart, which I experienced as very biblical, was related to my reading of the Bible on homosexuality.

I had observed that many denominations seem to display a keen awareness of Christ's love for gay and lesbian believers. Yet in practice, they make no appreciable progress in welcoming gay believers or making them feel accepted.

It dawned on me that churches may have a pair conflicting attitudes on homosexuality, both based on the Bible. On one hand, churches may be compelled to be open to gays and lesbians who have seen the Bible as liberating them for a positive relation with God in Christ, a liberation which includes even their sexual lives. Such openness would be anchored in God's unconditional love.

Yet the other attitude, anchored largely in a reading of Romans 1, might compel Christians to feel they must represent the wrath of God toward homosexuals. In the practice of almost all churches, this second attitude has won out over the first, or has at least become a precondition for the first.

Since this focus on the wrath of God (not limited to homosexuals) is based primarily on an understanding of Romans 1:18-32, I began to consider the current, widely shared interpretation of that passage.

Additionally, I was interested in exploring Paul's ideas of faith, justification and the wrath of God because of my discomfort with my church's insistence on discipline as the mark of the true church. How does a punitively maintained stress on purity relate to the Reformation tradition of grace and faith?

I found many scholars who shared my concerns. Modern commentators like Paul Achtemeier and James Dunn have actively discussed whether Paul's notion of justification is really forensic – that is, whether it concerns our legal position before God as judge. They have also raised questions as to whether the primary theme of Romans is, as tradition has it, justification by faith.

By the mid-eighties, my reflections and readings had alerted me to the possibility that Paul's quote from Habakkuk at the end of Romans 1:17 indicates that Paul might see being justified (made just) as *doing justice* in Christ, rather than being guiltless in Christ. In other words, the characteristic of those made just by God in Christ might be the doing of mercy toward the godless (as God has done in Christ). Faith, in that case, would be our trust in such a practice of justice in Christ as the source of new life.

In a paper for a conference on racism (later published as “The Just Shall Live”), I argued that the faith stated in Romans 1:16-17 is our trusting in God's gift of life so much that we incarnate within ourselves God's justice as shown in Christ's cross. Having faith, we will be just in our lives, as God was just in Christ. In Romans 1:16-17, which is the core of Romans, God promises life in the showing of mercy. To live in that trust by enacting it is what I believe Paul, following Habakkuk, calls faith.

My different reading of our faith – moving away from intellectual assent – radically affected my interpretation of our calling. Grace and mercy were not just acts of God toward us but also the main characteristics of a church called to trust the power of God unto life.

Understanding the importance of grace and mercy encouraged me to read the Bible as potentially more gentle toward gays and lesbians, even as I continued to understand homosexuality as sinful. This reading of Romans

1:16-17 gave me a more clearly biblical reference point for the attitude of my heart towards lesbians and gays. Yet I was to uncover much more.

In a two-part article for *The Banner* (August 12, 1991, and August 26, 1991), John Bolt wrote about Scripture's sweep "toward greater clarity in Christ, God's final Word of Revelation." Bolt holds that as the church grows in understanding life in Christ, the spirituality of the church may require a body of norms and attitudes different from those concretely specified in the Bible, in order to express that greater clarity. While Bolt would not likely appreciate the use of this concept with relation to homosexuality, a recent report for the Reformed Ecumenical Council (*Hermeneutics and Ethics*) seems more open to this, arguing that a direct and unmediated application of biblical texts to contemporary situations, including our attitude toward homosexuality, is unwarranted.

Whether one is initially inclined to accept this idea or not, we surely must recognize that biblical writers clearly did not have our modern understanding of differences in sexual orientation. The Bible did not have experience with the nurturing of caring, moral, lasting same-sex relationships, especially not such relationships self-consciously developed in the context of fellowship with Christ.

Changed historical circumstances invite the church to deal with biblical passages on homosexuality as we have dealt with passages on slavery, usury, war, or the role of women. With these, profoundly different historical understandings and situations have reassured us we need not read the Bible as calling for the very same attitudes called for in biblical times. While some may see this as a refusal to heed "the plain teaching of Scripture," numerous critics believe appeals to altered historical circumstances are a legitimate hermeneutical move.

Understanding the Bible in this way, we might move toward an approach which could help the church learn to profoundly respect, normatively, the pious biblical spirituality of its own gay and lesbian couples. We might begin to learn from these Christians who, because of their profound respect for Scripture, have carefully studied negative texts on “homosexuality” – often finding them more accurately directed at specific practices of cult prostitution or hedonistic promiscuity which are quite unlike their own morally focused and Christ-inspired relationships. We might begin to understand the Bible’s few verses which deal with homosexuality in light of a larger biblical perspective which forbids us in Christ’s name from building walls between us.

Yet a genuinely biblical hermeneutic requires us to make sense of particular texts specifically addressing homosexuality. Reinterpreting such texts with integrity is a phase we cannot skip. The church had to do it with slavery, usury, and war; we’re just beginning to come through it with texts relating to women; and we are still deeply involved with it with homosexuality.

As Bolt might say, the sweep of the Scriptures toward Christ should not sweep the Scriptures *away* in Christ. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) likely turned down its recent report on human sexuality in part because the links to the Bible in terms of traditional expectations were not sufficiently visible. Finding support for what might be called a biblical moving *beyond* specific Scripture passages should still be supportable with careful exegesis of concrete texts.

In “How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?” N.T. Wright has suggested that the life of the contemporary church can be looked on as the last act of a play whose earlier acts were recorded in the Bible. In this view, biblical authority would demand that the last act, though not scripted in the Bible, be in continuity with the acts presented in Scripture. While this would

allow for a variety of possible last acts, each must demonstrably have its continuity anchored in the actual Scriptures. So if my professional practice and my life experience open me up to an understanding of Scripture with greater latitude for same sex couples, how do I square that with Romans 1:18-32?

In *Setting Our Sights by the Morning Star*, I suggested the sweep of Scripture might lead us to a different understanding of Romans 1:18-32, one based on what I suggest is Paul's understanding of faith and justification expressed in Romans 1:16-17. In Romans 1:18-32, the only biblical passage on homosexuality which includes women, we, of course, find a very negative attitude.

But it occurred to me that this section might present not Paul's own proclamation of God's condemnation of sin, but the Jewish tradition's understanding of the consequences of sin – the wrath of God. Paul, in contrast to the view expressed in Romans 1:18-32, would see sin as needing a different approach, one based in the justice of God which is mercy.

Paul's overriding aim in Romans, which he develops starting in Romans 3:21, is to present a solution to sin apart from the law, one which does not lead to condemnation. I suggested that, read against the background which precedes it in Romans 1:16-17 (we have life in trusting God's justice) and connected with the material which follows in Romans 2:1-4 (the Jewish tradition can't be read as offering ground for judgmental approaches), Romans 1:18-32 could be no more than a description of a problem which requires a better solution – not wrath and death as solution but grace and life.

So I concluded Romans 1:18-32 might not need be an invitation to condemn. I came to see this passage as a picture of a creaturely condition

to which only the grace of God in Christ offers a solution. And I became persuaded that we are invited to incorporate radically that grace in our relationships to lesbians and gays.

When I suggested this interpretation in the “Postscript” to *Setting Our Sights by the Morning Star*, I had no idea additional evidence pointed to an even greater distance between Paul’s proclamation of the gospel in Romans and the description of God’s wrath in Romans 1:18-32. But after the book’s publication, I received information from many recognized biblical scholars who also consider the argument of Romans 1:18-32 to be the presentation of a view not original with Paul.

Both Richard Hay’s “Relations Natural and Unnatural,” (*Journal of Religious Ethics*, 1986) and James Dunn (in his Word commentary on Romans, 1988) portray Romans 1:18-32 as a standard condemnation of the pagans, a classic form of Jewish-Hellenic argument against unbelievers.

These scholars contend that this would be easily recognized and responded to as such by Paul’s Roman readers. Dunn says Paul could “assume this line of argument without any need to elaborate it in any detail, confident that his Roman audience would accept it readily enough, since most certainly it was the Jewish attitude to idolatry which had attracted many of them to the synagogue.”

Further, these two scholars point out that the passage is used rhetorically to lead to the exclamation of Romans 2:1-4 in which talk such as that of Romans 1:18-32 is exposed as accusing the accuser and which, in my view though probably not theirs, suggests that for Paul condemnation solves nothing. Hays talks about a clever and effective rhetorical tactic, although he also speaks of “Paul’s condemnation of homosexual practices.” Dunn says that “Paul’s attack is aimed most directly at what

he sees to be a typically Jewish attitude.” But if Paul’s attack of Romans 2:1 is directed at the mindset of Romans 1:18-32, is it likely that material he attacks is his own?

These two facts – that the material of Romans 1:18-32 is Hellenic-Jewish in origin and that it has a rhetorical function – strengthened my inclination to perceive a greater distance between Paul and the material in Romans 1:18-32 than either Dunn or Hays. Such distance would be a function of reading Romans 2:1-4 as saying: condemnation is not the way to go, because it will hit all of us. So the rhetoric would then say not just that judgmental Jews are hypocritical but that judgment solves nothing.

While I was astonished by what Dunn and Hays said about the function and origin of rhetoric, I was equally surprised by their apparently overlooking the distance this might create between Paul and the standard rhetoric. The tension is evident in Hays recent article discussing the same passage in the July 1991 issue of *Sojourners*.

On the one hand, he emphasizes that “the aim of Romans 1 is not to teach a code of sexual ethics; nor is the passage a warning of God’s judgment.” He states that if “homosexual persons are not welcome in the church, I will have to walk out the door along with them.” But he also says that the passage “builds a crescendo of condemnation” and interprets the rhetorical trap in Romans 2:1 as meaning that we are all “under God’s judgment.” Hence it again is not clear whether Romans 1:18-32 should be considered Paul’s proclamation of God’s judgment.

In any case, Hays and Dunn directed me to the possibility of a different interpretation than their own. I was further encouraged when a student alerted me to a French publication by Phillippe Rolland (*Epître aux Romains: Texte Grec Structure*) in which Romans 1:16-17 is said to be continued at Romans 3:21, after the intervening material discusses a

solution to sin opposed to Romans 1:16-17. Rolland holds that Romans 1:16-17 presents the gospel as God's promise of life, while the intervening material opens with wrath leading to death as an alternative way of dealing with sin.

Most commentators concur that tremendous barriers exist to finding widely agreed upon interpretations of Paul's writings, especially Romans. "The present climate of Pauline scholarship" says N.T. Wright in *The Climax of the Covenant*, is "more than a little confused." Paul Achtemeier believes we are discovering new approaches which allow "us to see in Romans some things which before were difficult to see, if not totally obscured."

I was struck by the questions any honest interpreter must ask: Did Paul use the standard condemnation with his own approval? Did he hold to the Jewish condemnation, sharing it to remind his fellow Jews that they were as much under that condemnation as Gentiles?

Or did Paul intend to be read (and was indeed read by his original audience) as referring to a standard attitude found in the synagogue, which he then proceeds to reject as not fitting the new situation of the gospel of Jesus Christ crucified? Was Paul presenting Romans 1:18-32 as a traditional understanding of sin, one which he himself had once shared, only to contrast it with the cross of Christ, where the grace of God rather than God's wrath is revealed?

A.J.M. Wedderburn holds that in Romans Paul is sorting out the ways in which faith in Jesus moves believers beyond the outlook of the traditional synagogue community. This understanding certainly strengthens the possibility that Paul's intent is not to condemn homosexual behavior. After much reading and study, I felt the evidence strongly pointed to the

possibility that Paul's "no condemnation" of Romans 8:1 might apply to Romans 1:18-32.

But when I wrote of this in *More Light Update* and spoke of it to audiences in England, Canada, and the United States, an uproar broke out in the community of folks who support my institution. One editorial accused me of irresponsible acrobatics in my use of Scripture. So once again I went to work, continuing to seek the help of other scholars.

My attention was drawn to George Edward's book *Gay/Lesbian Liberation: A Biblical Perspective*. Edwards comes to conclusions on Romans 1:18-32 similar to my own, arguing that "Paul presents in this section not thoughts that proceed from his own understanding of divine justice but those of the Jewish tradition."

Edwards also quotes another interpreter's suggestion that Paul in Romans 1:18-32 may have used this speech as a rhetorical device much as Nathan did in his speech to David in 2 Samuel.

Nathan's "You are that man" (Romans 12:7) seems similar to Paul's "Therefore you, O man have no excuse" (Romans 2:1) Edwards concludes that the "rhetorical context forbids the use of that passage for moral condemnation of homosexuality in itself."

Furthermore, recognized Pauline scholar E.P. Sanders believes Romans 1:18-32 is simply taken straight from existing Jewish material. Sanders, who devotes a special appendix to Romans 1:18-2:29 in his 1983 book *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, states that "no convincing argument" exists to support the view that "Paul has shaped the material to his 'own' point of view." While this opinion was controversial when published nearly ten years ago, it is used as reliable today by respected scholars like Martin Hengel and Alan F. Segal.

The fact that Paul does not clearly identify these verses as from another tradition is not necessarily a problem. The practice of identifying such material was different in Paul's time. Many commentators simply assume other traditions are at work here and that Paul's contemporaries would have recognized the obvious links to key literature of the Jewish-Hellenic tradition. Additionally, scholars such as Brevard Childs have pointed out Paul's established use of diatribe as debate with unidentified opponents in other passages. This insight has contributed to, for example, a reading of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 as a reference to a view held in Corinth but rejected by Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:36.

If we take Romans 2:1 and that which follows in the context of Romans 1:16-17 and Romans 3:21 and following, then not only are both Jew and Gentile brought into the picture, but condemnation is unmasked as not being part of God's solution to sin. For Romans 2:1 clearly concludes that none of us can judge, since according to Romans 1:18-32 we all do the very things we are judging.

I am aware of the danger of special pleading, of arguing for new understandings of a particular part of Scripture. And I've made no secret that my heart calls me to be supportive of gay and lesbian Christians. But there is no guarantee that special interests have not also shaped the traditional reading. As N.T. Wright's recent book states: "Let him without an agenda cast the first stone."

The passage can coherently be read more or less as it traditionally has been read. Our past reading makes it difficult for us to even consider other readings which might, at first, seem less obvious. But what if deep intuitions, in spite of currently strong traditions, continue to be suspicious of the established reading and lead to the uncovering of more evidence and arguments supporting this new understanding? I think we lose far more than we gain if we refuse to consider this non-traditional reading.

Potentially, Paul may have purposely included the reference to homosexuality precisely because he was ill at ease with its wholesale condemnation and rejection in the synagogue community. Paul certainly would have known the Jewish understanding which placed all homosexual behavior in a negative light. Same-sex acts were outside the Jewish holiness code and were largely known from their pagan cultic occurrence. In Paul's culture, male homosexual acts were considered debasing and were thought to rob men of their dignity. Additionally, the strong connection of sexual fruitfulness with the expected birth of the Messiah made all sexual acts which could not potentially lead to birth unacceptable. All of this would have led to an unconditional rejection of ancient Rome's same-sex practices which Jewish believers overwhelmingly saw as deviant, culturally unacceptable, debasing, infertile, and profanely wasteful.

What if Paul experienced this tradition as self-righteous condemnation, as the creation of an unnecessary barrier to the gospel? What if he was uncomfortable with the spreading of condemnation and darkness by those called to provide love and light?

The reading of Romans which I suggest would support the search for a more positive biblical view of morally focused same-sex relationships. And it would give us a profoundly different understanding of the *for* which introduces Romans 1:18. There is no unanimity about the meaning of this *for* – the New International Version leaves it untranslated; other critics suggest it points to the simultaneity of God's wrath and God's love.

I would join Paul Achtemeier who attaches great significance to this *for* as well as to all the others in this passage. I would suggest the *for* of Romans 1:18 indeed indicates why Paul is eager to preach the gospel: "I am eager to preach the gospel (Romans 1:15), for a traditional approach exists (Romans 1:18-32) which does not solve anything for anyone but

only brings judgment on all (Romans 2:1-3:20). But the gospel of Jesus definitively solves the problem (Romans 3:21 and following).”

This reading does justice, I think, to N.T. Wright’s persuasive reading of Paul as a whole. In his recent *The Climax of the Covenant*, Wright puts much emphasis on the Adam-Israel-Christ relationship. In fact, Wright’s approach to the whole New Testament owes much to his view that Israel in the Bible represents the failed mission of a people called to make known to the entire world God’s intention for humanity.

In Jesus, the failed mission of Israel was completed. Paul is anxious to preach the gospel to both Jew and Greek, because neither know the light – both know only God’s wrath.

The grace of God made known to Noah in the “never again” of Genesis 9:11 did not shape the life of Israel. The fact that humanity’s judge was seated in what in Israel was known as the mercy seat (Exodus 25:17) never became known to the world. The community in whom, as Habakkuk said, through faith God’s justice would be incarnate, instead loved to make known to the world God’s wrath.

Wright puts it very clearly: “The ministry of the old covenant was one of condemnation; that of the new is one of justification.” In Israel, the world never came to know the God who in Jesus suffered injustice and thus revealed light and glory. Only the wrath of God was revealed, to both Jew and Greek.

The *for* of Romans 1:18 introduces us to Paul’s powerful reason for preaching the gospel. The reason is not that all have sinned but that none have known the light. Through Israel, all have known judgment. Hence, Romans 2:1 clarifies the meaning of Romans 1:18-32: judgment gets to everyone, the judges are themselves also judged. In judgment all lose. Indeed, when Paul looks on his own background, all he could see was the

revelation of the wrath of God. But Paul now has another revelation, that of God's grace (Romans 3:21) which is available to all who have faith.

All this makes sense of the two ways in which Romans talks about "God's giving them over." In Romans 1:24, 26, 28 the giving over is understood as penalty (Romans 1:27) and as death deserving (Romans 1:32). This is the giving over of a tradition revealing God's wrath.

But this is quite different from the giving over which Paul understands in Christ, an opportunity for mercy (Romans 11:32). This later giving over to mercy is crucial to all of Romans, as scholars like Wright and Achtemeier have pointed out. And understanding the giving over in this sense, could significantly temper the church's use of Romans 1:18-32 to insist that there be discipline, in the sense of a punitive strategy, for wayward believers.

Specific times call us to new interpretations, new understandings of what is biblical. I believe my questions about another reading of Romans 1:18-32 need to be addressed for the sake of all within the church who struggle with the issue of homosexuality.

For if that passage was used rhetorically by Paul to describe his own pre-Christian tradition of judgment and condemnation, and if in Romans 2:1 he turns against that, then what is said about same-sex behavior in Romans 1 is not intended by Paul to invoke in us a condemnation of homosexuality.

My pointing this out is not, as some will surely claim, a strategy to help Christians conform to worldly attitudes about homosexuality. It is, in fact, just the opposite. For the world is profoundly anti-gay and anti-lesbian. This new reading of Romans is intended to set free the gospel for gays and lesbians in a world that often sees the church as supporting hatred of these people.

It is too early to plead for universal acceptance of the reading I have pointed out. But I believe scholars have established a need for evidence and discussion that helps us address the interpretation of this crucial passage anew. And such evidence and discussion can best be expected if the question that begs for it is shared with others.

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