

Condemnation of Homosexual Acts

In Romans 1:26–27 Paul refers to women and men who engage in what he regards as shameless sex acts with same-sex partners. He says these acts are “unnatural” and a consummation of “degrading passions.” These verses offer what is usually regarded as the most clear “generic condemnation” of homosexual activity in the Bible. Their relevance for ethical teaching on homosexual relations in our modern world has been a subject of much debate.

In Roman cities homosexuality was closely associated with promiscuous and exploitative activity, including prostitution, orgies, and sex with minors. Little was known of what is now called “sexual orientation,” and people were not generally classed as having a basic “heterosexual” or “homosexual” identity. Thus some scholars suggest that the best analogy for the behavior condemned by Paul might be “homosexual acts engaged in by heterosexual people.” Paul’s words, they say, would not necessarily apply to responsible partnerships between persons who are homosexual in terms of a basic (possibly genetic) orientation.

While support for this view seems to be increasing, many biblical scholars have not been convinced. They would say that Paul denounces the behavior not because it is promiscuous or exploitative but rather because it is “unnatural.” The point for Paul seems to be that such actions violate God’s original design for humanity. These scholars say that if Paul knew everything we know about sexual orientation, he would no doubt regard a “homosexual orientation” (even if genetically determined) as an unfortunate predisposition toward sin, as an inclination of the flesh that needs to be resisted or overcome by those who “walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (8:4).

Other biblical texts in which homosexual acts are mentioned include Genesis 19:1–9; Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Judges 19:22–25; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10.