

5. Roman 1.24-27

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves,²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.²⁶ For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature;²⁷ and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. (Romans 1:24-27 ESV)

Introduction: Helminiak, says that Rom 1 is “the most important statement of homosexuality in the Bible” (1153), but “far from condemning same-sex acts, Paul is actually teaching that they are ethically neutral. Like heterosexual acts, homosexual acts are neither right nor wrong in themselves. They can be used for good or for evil, but in themselves they are neither” (1189). How does he support these claims?

His support has its foundation in his explanation of “contrary to nature” in 1.26: **women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature** and the giving up by men of **natural relations with women** in 1.27. He says, “Nature” does not refer to something abstract like “Nature and the Laws of Nature” (1207). Instead: When people did something surprising, something unusual, something beyond the routine, something out of character, they were acting unnaturally. That was *the sense of the word nature in Paul’s usage* (1225, italics mine). The idea is not contrary to the laws of nature but “unexpectedly” or “in an unusual way.” So, in Rom 1, “It means that these women and men were engaging in sexual practices that were not the ones people usually perform. The practices were beyond the regular, outside the ordinary, more than the usual, not the expected. There is no implication *whatever* in those words that the practices were wrong or against God or contrary to the divine order of creation or in conflict with the universal nature of things. For Paul those words do not mean ‘unethical’” (1244, italics mine). He bases this conclusion on the use of the word natural in the following places (Gal 2.15, Rom 2.27: you expect Jews and Gentiles who are such by nature, to act accordingly; Rom 2.14: Gentiles do the law by nature, thus, they act in a way consistent with the kind of persons they are, 1207; 1 Cor 11.14: nature teaches you that long hair on a man is degrading; that is the custom, not a moral issue; Rom 11.24: God acts unnaturally (not unethically, simply unexpectedly) ingrafting a wild branch into a cultivated tree.

In evaluation, we cannot simply assume that the meaning in five examples (in which there appears to be no ethical connotation) automatically tells us what a word must mean in the next or any other example. DeYoung cites FDR saying, “The soup was terrible” and “what the Nazis did was terrible.” Words can have a range of meaning from the non-ethical to the ethical.

A. A closer look at His examples

1. 1 Cor 11.14: Length of a man’s hair is a matter of custom that applied in the context of a Nazarite vow as a sign of his shame. Perhaps, we can say that this is what was *expected* of a Nazarite, but surely it was right to keep this vow; it was wrong for a Nazarite to cut his hair.

2. Gal 2.15; Rom 2.27: By nature a Jew, by nature a Gentile

This is easily taken to mean by natural birth, not in the sense of what is expected, and it does not have a moral sense either. This shows the range of meaning that the word has.

3. Rom 2.14 refers to doing the law of God by nature (**For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law**). This is what underlies the conscience; people have God’s standards within themselves impressed on their hearts; God’s law is revealed to them by their very make up as human beings. In this text “natural” has moral meaning: it is God’s revelation of right and wrong in the conscience.

4. The “weighty evidence” of Rom 11.24

In this text, God’s action is expressed figuratively. The figurative usage builds on a departure from the *natural* order of things in the physical world. It would be unnatural if a farmer were to graft a wild branch into a cultivated tree: it would go against the natural laws of farming, to aim to produce more *wild* fruit. The figurative use is meaningless without the natural biology that we can all observe. In the literal relation of men and women (1.26-27), natural conveys a biology of human relations just as there is a biology of farming to which we are to conform our understanding and practices. If you want productive plants, you follow the natural order; if you want productive human sexual relationships you follow the natural order, which is male-female versus same sex relations.

In sum, what do we get from Helminiak’s examples? We learn that *natural* has a range of meanings that include moral connotation (i.e. a natural sense of ought, a Nazarite vow) and

natural observable biology. He incorrectly *restricts* the term to the morally neutral notion of the unexpected.

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B. The context in Romans

We need to consider the context to see how natural biology is inseparably tied to sexual morality.

1) Natural revelation

In Romans 2.14, natural has an ethical connotation showing that matters of natural revelation carry ethical implications. Natural revelation is contextual in Romans 1 that states how ungodly people suppress the truth they know through the created order: **For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth** (1.18). God is revealed in the creation (1.19). The Psalmist adds that we know His glory and wisdom in all the works of His hands (Ps 19; 104). From Genesis one we know that things are the way that they are as the products of God's creative breath. So, natural revelation is God's speech. In all the sciences then, we study God's word and share in His wise design of people and things. In this context of natural revelation, doing what is contrary to nature means going against the truth that God has planted in the conscience and that is known by observation of the basics of sexual relationships that the Creator has revealed in our very make up as men and women. For example, organs of reproduction are wonderfully complimentary.

2) Special revelation

Natural revelation of course speaks to the created order of things since the beginning (1.20) and it is the Creator (1.25) that judged people by turning them over to their lusts (1.23, 26). We can hardly divorce the meaning of natural sexual relationships (a boundary crossed by homosexuals) from creation and thus from God's special written revelation of His creative design for sexual relations. Therefore, what is natural for sexual intimacy is defined by Gen 1-2 for husband and wife, a point confirmed by Jesus who connects 1.28 with 2.24 in Mk 10.6-9, which in turn shows that the leaving and cleaving of sexual intimacy is for husband and wife, and it abides for all time from the beginning.

3) Homosexual conduct of 1.26-27 is punishable sin (they receive the due penalty, 1.27).

4) In the flow of thought, these homosexual acts are examples of the ungodliness and unrighteousness that brings God's wrath (1.18).

5) These acts, moreover, are not only ethically impure and subject to punishment, but they are also ways that God judges people by giving them over to them with the designation that they are dishonorable passions. His judgment for sin means that He leaves them to sin's intensification. Helminiak notes correctly that dishonorable can have a morally neutral meaning. However, that is not so in the flow of thought from 1.18 (all ungodliness and unrighteousness) to 1.32 (these people among other things, approve and disapprove of practices that bring the penalty of death). If we connect impurity (1.24) to the Levitical code, as Helminiak does, then we have further ground for the conclusion that homosexuality (1.26-27) is punishable iniquity among all nations (Lev 18.25), as we saw in our study of the holiness code. Moreover, impurity is pointedly put in perspective by Paul in Rom 6.19 as lawless use of the members of the body and contrary to holiness. In Gal 5.19, impurity is a work of the flesh associated with sexual immorality and sensuality. Contrastingly, the fruit of the Spirit is self control (5.23); by the Spirit, we crucify the flesh **with its passions...desires** (5.24), knowing the deceitfulness of these desires, we put to death sexual immorality, impurity, passion and evil desire (Col 2.5).

Conclusion

Helminiak fragments Biblical teaching by isolating word usage and by imposing meanings out of context. This is contrary to his own hermeneutical emphasis, for example, on understanding what it means for someone to be out in left field in different contexts: playing baseball versus being clueless. Although all the relevant terms of 1.18-32 (lust, impurity, dishonor, unnatural, shameless, debased) *may* have ethically neutral uses, here in Romans 1, they are all examples of ungodliness and unrighteousness (1.18), things that *ought not to be done* (1.28), and they are all actions that merit death (1.32; 2.5; 2.8).

Therefore, both forms of homosexuality in Romans 1.26-27 are sinful acts that contradict sexual purity. As unrighteous acts, they drive the suppression of the truth given in both natural and special revelation and that merits God's wrath. Suppressing the truth and excusing sin here in Romans 1 are sober reminders of the deceitfulness of sin. Therefore we have a reminder of our need to be fully armed for spiritual battle with all sin, and to go to war with an army of saints helping one another by mutual love (Heb 3.13).