



Being Faithful to the Scriptures: Romans 1:26-27 as a Case in Point*

ARLAND J. HULTGREN

*Luther Seminary
St. Paul, Minnesota*

THE QUESTION PUT BEFORE US BY THE PLANNING COMMITTEE ON THIS OCCASION IS: "How shall we honor the normative character of scripture for matters of faith and life as we address concerns where there is conflict in the Christian community? Case in point: Human sexuality in light of Romans 1."

My presentation is divided into four parts. I begin by discussing historical and literary contexts, then move on to exegetical and hermeneutical matters, and end up with some conclusions.

I. ROMANS 1:26-27 IN ITS HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXTS

In terms of the *historical* context of Romans there is little debate. It is generally held that Paul wrote Romans in the mid-50s from Corinth.

In chapter one Paul speaks about same-sex behavior. We might assume that what he writes about was evident to him at Corinth and elsewhere. But it is hard to know for certain. Paul was of Jewish background, and many of the expressions he uses echo ancient Jewish writings, including those of Philo (ca. 20 B.C.-A.D. 45) and Josephus (ca. A.D. 37-100).¹ In Jewish thought homosexual activity was con-

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¹Philo, *On Abraham* 135-36; *Special Laws* 3:37-42; Josephus, *Apion* 2:273-75; *Jewish Antiquities* 15:28-29. Cf. also the *Letter to Aristaeus* 152; and *Pseudo-Phocylides* 190-92, 213-14.

ARLAND J. HULTGREN is professor of New Testament.

sidered a gentile problem especially, typical of their lifestyle and widespread among them; and it was linked to idolatry.

Of course the Jewish writers could be accused of exaggerating the ways of the gentiles. But a look at surviving literature and visual arts from antiquity confirms that the Jewish critics were not just name-calling. The picture that emerges from studies of overt homosexuality in the Greco-Roman world is that such activity was quite common, quite public, and widely tolerated.² But what kind of activity? The following four phenomena are well documented:

1. Pederasty. By definition, pederasty is an erotic relationship of an older man with a youth. The ideal for the older man was to have a boy as an erotic companion prior to the boy's having a beard. Once the boy reached that stage, the man would acquire another. According to both Dover and Karlen, homosexual activity between partners of the same age category is virtually unknown in the sources.³ And Robin Scroggs has written: "Apart from certain exceptions of an adult male prostitute..., I know of no suggestions in the texts that homosexual relationships existed between same-age adults."⁴

2. Sexual abuse of slaves by their owners. While pederasty involved major differentials of power and age between the abuser and the victim, this form of abuse involved a differential of power and social class. And it took place in a world where about 20% of the population was made up of slaves, even more – up to a third – in some cities.⁵

3. Both male and female prostitution.

4. Lesbianism – at least in literature. Whether Paul actually observed it or not, gentile literary works spoke of female homosexuality. Several Hellenistic works prior to Paul's day speak of Sappho of the sixth century B.C. who had a school of music and poetry for girls on the island of Lesbos. Her surviving poems express eroticism for girls, and she is portrayed – rightly or wrongly – in Hellenistic sources as having physical relationships with the girls in her school.⁶

All this took place in a world of machismo where men seemed to think that the male sex organ was their most useful weapon to make conquests and establish power. Men were driven to seek honor and to avoid shame. It was also a world of

²Kenneth J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1978); Arno Karlen, "The Greek Revision," in *Sexuality and Homosexuality: A New View* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971) 12-43; idem, "Homosexuality in History," *Homosexual Behavior: A Modern Reappraisal*, ed. Judd Marmor (New York: Basic, 1980) 75-99. A generous survey of historical information is also provided by Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 17-43.

³K. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, 16; cf. also his statement on pp. 202-203: "On growing up, in any Greek community, the *eromenos* [=boy lover] graduated from pupil to friend, and the continuance of an erotic relationship was disapproved, as was such a relationship between coevals"; A. Karlen, "Homosexuality in History," 79.

⁴R. Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 35.

⁵John E. Stambaugh and David L. Balch, *The New Testament in Its Social Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) 123; and Wayne G. Rollins, "Slavery in the New Testament," in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume*, ed. Keith Crim (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976) 830.

⁶K. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, 171-84.

misogyny where women were marginalized. According to Dover, women were encouraged to treat all men alike with mistrust.⁷ And so we should be struck more than we usually are by those passages in the New Testament in which men are exhorted to love their wives (Eph 5:25; Col 3:19). These are counter-cultural exhortations.

The most blatant form of homosexual activity was pederasty. Some gentile writers of antiquity condemned what they saw, including contemporaries of Paul, such as Dio Chrysostom (ca. A.D. 40-112) and Seneca (ca. 5 B.C.-A.D. 65).⁸ But Jewish writers attacked it most vigorously. The author of the *Testament of Levi*—thought to come from the second century B.C.—speaks of pederasty as a direct consequence of idolatry (17:11).⁹ In the Jewish work called the *Sibylline Oracles*—in a portion also thought to come from the second century B.C.—the same link between idolatry and pederasty is made (3:586-600), and there is a list provided of those national groups who practice pederasty. These are the Phoenicians, Egyptians, Romans, Greeks, Persians, Galatians, and all the people of Asia Minor (3:595-600).¹⁰ That is another way of saying that the gentile nations are filled with pederasts. Finally, Philo names pederasty as a common vice among gentiles in various cities.¹¹

Here it is time to stop and look at 1 Cor 6:9 along the way to the passage in Romans. There Paul says that certain persons, whom he calls the *μαλακοί* and the *ἀρσενικοῖται*, will not inherit the kingdom of God. These terms, however, are horribly difficult to translate. What does *μαλακοί* mean? The KJV said “effeminate.”¹² But more likely it means the young male who had not yet grown a beard or other bodily hair. And the term *ἀρσενικοῖται*—what does that mean? Paul probably coined it, for it does not appear in any known Greek literature prior to him, and the only other place in the New Testament is at 1 Tim 1:10. There is, in any case, a strong possibility that it is to be read in association with *μαλακοί* and then understood to signify pederasts, as in Luther’s translation of the New Testament¹³ and in books by Robin Scroggs, Wolfgang Schrage, and Eduard Lohse;¹⁴ this is seen as a possibility by Joseph Fitzmyer.¹⁵ Another possibility, suggested by Victor

⁷Ibid., 89.

⁸Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses* 78:36; Seneca, *Moral Epistles* 47:7.

⁹The text is in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, 2 vols. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983-85) 1:794.

¹⁰Text in *ibid.*, 1:375.

¹¹Philo, *Special Laws* 3:37. That he refers to gentile activity becomes clear in 3:40.

¹²Luther’s New Testament (1522) has *Weichlinge* (=weaklings); the NIV (1973) and NRSV (1989) have “male prostitutes.”

¹³Luther’s New Testament (1522) has *Knabenschänder* (=pederasts); the NIV (1973) has “homosexual offenders” and the NRSV (1989) has “sodomites.”

¹⁴R. Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 108; Wolfgang Schrage, *Der Erste Brief an die Korinther* (Zürich: Benziger, 1991) 431; and Eduard Lohse, *Theological Ethics of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1991) 119-20.

¹⁵Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1933) 287.

Furnish, is that these persons were customers of call-boys,¹⁶ which would still signify that they were men who took advantage of boys.

If these exegetical judgments are sound, we should pause and consider what Paul is saying here. From what he says in 6:11, it is clear that some of the men in the Corinthian congregation had been victims and violators. But now they have been washed—meaning baptized—as well as sanctified and justified. For Paul, then, the wicked cycle of pederasty has to go. Anyone who continues to carry on in the old ways will not inherit the kingdom of God. But now the old condition has been abolished. Belonging to Christ, these persons and all the others mentioned in the series have newness of life.

But now let's get back to the Romans passage and look at its *literary* context. It appears in a section running from 1:18 through 3:20 in which Paul indicts the whole world, made up of Jews and gentiles, declaring that it is under the wrath of God. In 1:18-32 Paul speaks specifically of gentiles. He starts out in verses 18 through 22 to say that the gentiles have always been capable of knowing and worshipping God, but they have refused to do so.

Verses 1:23 through 32 have a structure built around the verbs of “exchange” on the part of human beings and the verbs of “giving over” (or “abandoning”) on the part of God:

Humanity *exchanged* (ἔλλαξαν) the glory of God for images (1:23).

Therefore God *gave over* (παρέδωκεν) humanity to impurity, to dishonoring their bodies (1:24).

Humanity *exchanged* (μετήλλαξαν) the worship of God for idolatry (1:25).

Therefore God *gave over* (παρέδωκεν) humanity to dishonorable passions (1:26a).

Humanity *exchanged* (μετήλλαξαν) natural relations for unnatural (1:26b-27).

Since people did not acknowledge God, God *gave them over* (παρέδωκεν) to a base mind and improper conduct (1:28). A vice list follows.

I am providing my own translation of Romans 1:26-27 and have supplied some notes from two lexicons to shed some light on my rather literal translation.

(1:26) Therefore God gave them over (παρέδωκεν αὐτούς¹⁷) unto passions of dishonor (πάθη ἀτιμίας¹⁸), for their [i.e., the gentiles'] females exchanged (μετήλλαξαν) the natural (φυσικὴν¹⁹) [sexual] relationship (χρησιν²⁰) for that [relationship which is] contrary to nature (τὴν παρὰ φύσιν²¹); (1:27) likewise, also the

¹⁶Victor P. Furnish, *The Moral Teaching of Paul: Selected Issues*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985) 72.

¹⁷Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d ed., trans. W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, F. W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979) 615, on Rom 1:26: “he abandoned them to disgraceful passions.”

¹⁸Ibid., 603, on Rom 1:26: “disgraceful passions.”

¹⁹Ibid., 869, on Rom 1:26: “natural, in accordance with nature.”

²⁰Ibid., 885-86, on Rom 1:26: “relations, function, esp. of sexual intercourse.”

²¹Ibid., 610-11, on Rom 1:26: “against, contrary to” nature.

males, abandoning the natural [sexual] relationship of [=with] the female, became inflamed (ἐξεκαούθησαν²²) in their passion for one another, males carrying on disgraceful conduct (τὴν ἀσχημοσύνην²³) among males and receiving among themselves the penalty [=abandonment to lust], which it was necessary [for them to receive] from their error (πλάνησ²⁴) [of idolatry].

II. EXEGETICAL OBSERVATIONS

1. The homosexual activities spoken of are those of gentiles who refuse to worship God. That it is specifically gentiles that are meant has been established in the commentaries, especially well in the one by Fitzmyer.²⁵

2. Paul is not speaking here of individuals, but of the behavior of pagan gentiles as a whole. All the indicative verbs in verses 22 through 27 are in past tense (aorists), as though Paul is speaking of something that happened long ago in some primeval time. As a literary piece the account has a mythic quality; indeed, it reads like an etiological account. It is what we might call a “genesis of gentile behavior” this side of the genesis of humanity as a whole. It is as though once upon a time the gentiles had their chance, but they blew it. The result was a mess. The gentiles are the way they are because they have been idolaters ever since they had a choice in the matter.

3. When Paul says that women and men gave up or abandoned natural relations with people of the opposite gender, he is speaking of what is characteristic of the gentile lifestyle as known in Jewish tradition. Of course Paul knows right well that gentile males and females have heterosexual relationships. But in their culture, their ethos, they have abandoned the natural relationship, so that homosexual activity is common among them. His comments here fit squarely into the situation of his day, as we know it.

4. In 1:27 Paul is not speaking of homosexual attraction on the part of males. The concept of sexual orientation, including homosexual orientation, had to wait another nineteen centuries to be formulated. Paul is not talking here about a portion of the gentile population—1%, 7%, 10%, or whatever the figure—who might be homosexual in orientation, but about gentiles in general. The idolatrous gentiles know no bounds, Paul says, and so their world is full of pederasty and abuse of all kinds. The men are “inflamed in their passion” for one another.

Actually the verb translated “inflamed” is considerably stronger than that. The verb appears only here in the New Testament and has the meaning of being utterly consumed by fire. That is how it is used dozens of times in Hellenistic Jewish texts.²⁶ It is often used metaphorically in connection with wrath and rage.²⁷

²²Ibid., 240, on Rom 1:27: “were inflamed with sensuous desire.”

²³Ibid., 119, on Rom 1:27: “shameless deed.” Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1940) 267, on Rom 1:27: “disgraceful conduct.”

²⁴W. Bauer, *Lexicon*, 665, on Rom 1:27: “the idolatry of the heathen.”

²⁵J. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 270-73.

²⁶In the Septuagint, for example: Exod 21:6; Num 11:1; Judg 15:5, and many more instances.

²⁷In the Septuagint, for example: Deut 29:20; 32:22; 2 Sam (2 Kingdoms) 22:9; 2 Chron 34:21, 25, and many more instances.

In regard to sexual matters, it is used in Sir 23:17 in the saying: "A fornicator will not cease until fire utterly consumes him." The upshot is that Paul is speaking here of something beyond normal sexual desire; it is a lust that destroys the self and ends in abusive behavior. When Paul speaks of normal sexual desire, as at 1 Cor 7:9, he uses a different verb altogether, the simple and familiar word in Greek literature for being inflamed with passion, παρώω.²⁸

Finally, the term translated "passion" in 1:27 is also found only here in the New Testament. When it is used in other Greek sources, it has a pejorative, negative connotation.²⁹

By way of an exegetical summary, the following can be said: In Romans 1 Paul declares that the entire gentile world stands under the judgment of God. While it *could* have honored and worshiped God the Creator, from early on it *chose* to go its own way into idolatry and therefore is known for all sorts of vices, including the homosexual activities that are familiar in the literature and general culture of the Greco-Roman world. God has not intervened, and so the future of the gentiles looks hopeless. But of course the apostle to the gentiles will go on to say that a new world has been opened through the death and resurrection of Christ. By faith in Christ, gentiles will become a part of the redeemed new humanity (3:29-30; 4:9-25) and be saved from the wrath to come.

III. OUR CONTEXT: HOMOSEXUALITY AND HERMENEUTICS

When we read a text like this, we bring certain presuppositions and information to it. What are some of the things at our disposal as we listen? Interpretation is inevitably a conversation between the reader and the text.

1. In our time two concepts are firmly fixed in our common life, which derive from scientific studies. The first is the concept of sexual orientation; and the second is that one's heterosexual or homosexual orientation is not a matter of choice, but a complex matter of nature and nurture. Moreover, it is clear from a growing body of evidence that pre-natal factors, including genetic ones, are significant in the shaping of who we are as sexual beings. These matters are stated in standard, establishment works, such as in articles on homosexuality in *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*³⁰ and in standard text-books and encyclopedias on psychiatry.³¹ They are affirmed in more recent studies, such as in the results of the study of twins, neurological studies of the brain, and even more recent studies of DNA. These things have been reported in articles since 1991 in the *New York Times* and the

²⁸For references, see *A Greek English Lexicon*, ed. H. Liddell and R. Scott, 1558.

²⁹So J. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 287.

³⁰Mark F. Schwartz, "Homosexuality," in *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, ed. Philip W. Goetz, 29 vols. (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1987) 27:260-63.

³¹Warren J. Gudpaille, "Homosexuality," in *Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry*, ed. Harold I. Kaplan and Benjamin J. Sadock, 2 vols. (Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins, 1989) 1:1086-96; and Judd Marmor, "Homosexuality: An Overview," in *International Encyclopedia of Psychiatry, Psychology, Psychoanalysis, and Neurology*, ed. Benjamin B. Wolman, 12 vols. (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1977) 5:407-10.

Washington Post, as well as in July 1993 issues of *Science* and *Time* magazines.³² For us to say that all this is of no importance for theology and ethics, or to write it off as gay propaganda, would be irresponsible.

On the other hand, to say that the scientific information makes things easy is to jump too soon. Articles in a recent issue of *dialog* by Philip Hefner and Ted Peters demonstrate some of the complexities.³³ Nevertheless, the new information does press upon us the question of what is right and good for those who are homosexual by no choice of their own. What is good for them, and what is good for society? There are some things we can say, and ought to say, that moralists of previous generations had never considered.

We must be frank here in interpreting Romans. Paul did not have our information and ways of thinking at hand. Even Richard Hays – whose essay is often celebrated by those who claim that Paul condemns homosexuality *en toto*, even homosexual orientation³⁴ – says that exegesis, even his own, does not settle contemporary questions. He says that we must ask whether the practice that Paul condemns corresponds with practices we know today.³⁵ And he makes an astonishingly broad generalization when he says that Romans 1 should not be used to condemn homosexual behavior³⁶ – a statement made without any qualifications whatsoever.

2. We know another matter. There are different kinds of homosexuality; there are *homosexualities*. There is the homosexual activity that is done for kicks by persons who would otherwise regard themselves as heterosexuals. Another kind of activity occurs in prisons and other places of confinement by men or women who would otherwise understand themselves as heterosexuals.

But there are also persons who understand themselves as homosexuals. And when we talk about homosexual lifestyle, we should recognize the obvious. As with lifestyles that are heterosexual, these often take different forms. One homosexual lifestyle is abstinence by the person who understands himself or herself as a homosexual. Another is that of a committed relationship in love with another person that endures throughout life. Another is that of promiscuity. And so on. To recognize that there are homosexualities (plural) is to recognize something that Paul did not.

³²Curt Suplee, "Brain May Determine Sexuality: Node Seen as Key to Gay Orientation," *Washington Post* (August 30, 1991) A.1; Malcolm Gladwell, "Genes Tied to Sexual Orientation: Study of Gay Men Bolsters Theory," *Washington Post* (December 17, 1991) A.1; Natalie Angier, "Researchers Find a Second Anatomical Idiosyncrasy in Brains of Homosexual Men," *New York Times* (August 1, 1992) A.7; Christopher B. Daly, "Study of Twins Suggests Lesbianism Has a Genetic Component," *Washington Post* (March 15, 1993) A.3; Robert Pool, "Evidence for Homosexuality Gene," *Science* 261 (July 16, 1993) 291-92; and Ellen Germain and Alice Park, "Born Gay?" *Time* 142/4 (July 26, 1993) 36-39.

³³Philip Hefner, "Determinism, Freedom, and Moral Failure"; and Ted Peters, "On the Gay Gene: Back to Original Sin Again?" *dialog* 33 (1994) 23-29 and 30-38, respectively.

³⁴Anonymous, "The ELCA Sex Report," *Lutheran Commentator* 5/5 (March/April 1992) 1-8.

³⁵Richard B. Hays, "Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell's Exegesis of Romans 1," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 14 (1986) 205, 209.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 210.

3. In Romans 1 Paul attacks homosexual activity known in his world – massive pederasty and promiscuity among gentiles. He had no idea that there could be persons who actually have a homosexual orientation; he could not have done so. Moreover, he would never have encountered a person who says: “I am a Christian. I am homosexual.” But in our time such persons do exist. We know them. And the new situation calls for a response that meets the facts with fairness for them and for all.

4. We must ask what implications there are here for the so-called first use of the law, i.e., that function of the law which is for the protection of society and is enforced by civil authorities, by force if necessary.³⁷ We must remind ourselves that law changes over time, and it must change if it is to protect society. In Luther’s world the first use of the law maintained a social order of princes, nobles, masters, housewives, servants, and peasants. But things have changed, and laws have changed over time as well. Since a function of the law is to maintain the public good, specific laws must be altered in light of new conditions, new understandings – precisely for the good order of society. In light of what we know, it is evident that the first use of the law should extend to the protection of persons who identify themselves as homosexuals. And in the view of many, it should protect covenants between them, as it does in some American cities and European countries.

5. But what if my exegetical judgments are wrong? What if it is the case that in Romans 1 Paul condemns homosexual orientation and activity of every conceivable kind?

In response to that, I would argue that we are still in need of a consistent hermeneutic in the church.

Let me digress to make my point. In 1925 the Augustana Lutheran Church – one of the predecessors of our church – adopted a resolution on human sexuality, specifically on the “Remarriage of Divorced Persons.” I shall quote from the text adopted:

“The Synod steadfastly adheres to the doctrine in the Bible...that marriage cannot be annulled or dissolved except by death, adultery, or...desertion....[Here the text goes on to quote from the gospels and Paul.]

“The Synod...solemnly cautions its pastors against officiating at the marriage of divorced persons, except in the case of the innocent party, when legal divorce has been granted on the ground of adultery or...desertion....

“Should any pastor wilfully disregard this stand of the Synod, and perform a marriage contrary to the letter and spirit of these resolutions, he shall be deemed guilty of misconduct in the administration of his holy office, and be subject to discipline by the constituted church authorities.”³⁸

³⁷On the “first use of the law” in the Lutheran Confessions, see Apology 18 and the Smalcald Articles 3:2 in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 225, 303, respectively; cf. also Werner Elert, *The Christian Ethos* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957) 67-69.

³⁸Quoted from Conrad Lindberg, *Syllabus of Lutheran Church Polity* (Rock Island: Augustana Book Concern, 1927) 136-38.

Now why do I quote this? People in 1925 believed that they were representing the clear teaching of the New Testament concerning sexual conduct. In point of fact, they were correct. The teaching of the New Testament is clear: a divorced person must remain single or return to the first spouse. Exceptions are allowed only for a person whose former spouse committed adultery or deserted that person.

Why, I ask, is this regulation not in force today for persons in ordained ministry? Why do we allow pastors to perform marriages of divorced persons? And why do we not declare in our sermons that all members of the congregation who have been divorced and are remarried are living in a permanently adulterous situation, unless they were “innocent” victims of adultery or desertion? The teaching of the New Testament is clear. Moreover, why is the remarriage of divorced persons not even a moral issue in the ELCA statement, *The Church and Human Sexuality: A Lutheran Perspective*?³⁹ And why is no one upset that it is not raised as a moral issue? (And shall we now revisit the question of the ordination of women in light of 1 Cor 14:33-36 and 1 Tim 2:8-15?) I shall leave the matter at that, except to say that too often in matters of sexual conduct people ignore those passages of the scriptures that are clear, and yet will quote others that are less clear, as in the case of Romans 1. What we need is a consistent hermeneutic, rather than using the Bible on *one* issue in a way that we would *never* use it elsewhere.

IV. SOME CONCLUSIONS

As I see it, there are at least four challenges facing the church in regard to the use of Romans 1 and related passages in modern life.

1. The first challenge is to address human conduct that is destructive and contrary to the will of God, as we understand it. We can all agree that there is sexual activity, both heterosexual and homosexual, that is destructive to self, other persons, and society as a whole. Pedophilia, promiscuity, and other abusive activities must be opposed. It is here that Romans 1 speaks directly.

2. The second challenge—specifically in pastoral care—is to refer persons who are confused about their sexual orientation to competent counseling services and to maintain pastoral care with them.

3. The third challenge is for the heterosexual majority in the church to try to understand, accept, and include in the life of our congregations persons of homosexual orientation who share our confession of faith, including those who openly identify themselves as homosexuals. From what they and their friends and relatives tell us, they have been made to feel as though they are condemned by God and by people in the church for feelings they cannot deny. They have discovered at some point in life that they are attracted to persons of the same gender, while most others are attracted to persons of the other gender, and they are as puzzled about

³⁹On p. 11 (lines 15-18) the remarriage of divorced persons is taken up as a matter for counsel, but not as a moral issue.

that as anyone else. As a psychiatrist said in my hearing once, while talking about sexual orientation, "The biggest sex organ we have is the brain."⁴⁰

Here I must take issue with those who claim that a homosexual orientation is a particular manifestation of sin⁴¹ and that it must be confessed in order to receive the mercy of God.⁴² What is the basis for saying such a thing? Can one use Rom 1:26-27 as the basis? No, Paul is not speaking here of homosexual orientation. Instead he is talking about the gentile world, a world of idolaters, who long ago rejected the worship of God and became a culture of abuse, in which power and conquest were established and displayed in sexual acts. Further, by using the language of "exchange" and talking about abandoning the natural relationship, Paul speaks of decisive and willful acts for which one is responsible. In short, he speaks of a choice. But who of us recalls ever making a choice about our sexual orientation?

4. The fourth challenge is to deal with persons of the same gender who live as couples in permanent, committed relationships. As of this date, over a dozen American cities have various forms of domestic partnership legislation,⁴³ and the number will grow. Business seems to be leading the way. Some fifty corporations (including Apple Computer, IDS, and Microsoft) extend insurance coverage to same sex domestic partners of employees, and some of them—like Apple Computer—are settling in small-town America, such as in Williamson County, Texas.⁴⁴ I am willing to predict that within ten years the Internal Revenue Service will allow joint returns for domestic partners of the same gender as well. What kind of response will the church make to these new realities? The answers are not clear, except for one thing. We are going to see all kinds of pastoral and congregational responses in a church of over five million members. Some of the responses will be public and liturgical; others will be confidential and pastoral. I doubt whether we can legislate these matters as a denomination, much less enforce any legislation we might come up with. Moreover, we can expect that many persons will not ask for any pastoral or ecclesiastical rites of passage in these matters. They will simply expect that their domestic partnerships be respected in the church as elsewhere. The more theologically informed might even tell us that their partnerships, recognized in law, are a matter of the kingdom on the left. How shall we respond to that? Simply quoting scripture against them won't do. And telling them that their relationships are immoral or a threat to society won't do, unless we are prepared to show why we

⁴⁰Dr. Sharon A. Satterfield, University of Minnesota, on October 25, 1988, to the task force on homosexual issues, Saint Paul Area Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

⁴¹Russell E. Saltzman, "Homosexuality and the ELCA," *Lutheran Commentator* 2/3 (Winter 1989) 7; and the anonymous writer of "The ELCA Sex Report," 6.

⁴²So the anonymous writer of "The ELCA Sex Report," 6.

⁴³According to a memo dated November 15, 1993, from the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the following cities can be listed: Austin, TX; Berkeley, CA; Boston; Burlington, VT; Cambridge, MA; East Lansing, MI; Minneapolis; New York; Santa Cruz, CA; San Francisco; Seattle; Washington, DC; and West Hollywood.

⁴⁴Richard Lacayo, "Take This Job and Shove It," *Time* 142/25 (December 13, 1993) 44.

think that way. In fact, they may well have the better argument, as conservative columnist Stephen Chapman of the *Chicago Tribune* has written. He says that those who cherish family values ought to welcome gays who want to practice them in committed relationships. If a society is hostile toward homosexuals, he says, the result is furtive promiscuity, marriage to conceal homosexual identity (which usually has a disastrous result for several persons in an extended family), self-loathing, and suicide.⁴⁵ His point is that there is a positive effect on society when it accepts domestic partnerships for homosexual persons.

There is much more to be said, but not now. In the meantime, I have attempted a reading of the text and a reading of our world that, in my judgment, honors scripture as norm for faith and life for the people of God.

⁴⁵Stephen Chapman, "Are 'Family Values' and 'Gay Lifestyle' Strange Bedfellows?" *Chicago Tribune*, 9 December 1993, 131.