

## **The Apostle Paul on Homosexuality: A Critical Analysis**

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### **Abstract**

In recent times, more homosexual people are becoming open with their sexuality. Given this observation, this study aims to investigate the connection between the Christian Bible and homosexuality within the Christian faith. Using critical analysis, this study analyzed the historical background of chosen Bible texts through the exegetical method. The immediate context of the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans in A.D. 57 regarding homosexuality was examined and compared with the situation in today's world. For instance, Paul's upbringing could have impacted his writing and thoughts on homosexuality, as some parts of his letter were quoted or paraphrased from contemporary philosophers of his time. Moreover, the social sexual construction in Tarsus, the city where Paul was raised, had a strong masculinity affinity linked with power and domination, which may have had an influence on this letter to his audience. The findings of this study attempt to address certain questions pertaining to the handling of issues between homosexual people and the church, which includes considerations for the church to prepare itself to respond biblically to homosexual members.

**Keywords:** *Homosexuality, Apostle Paul, LGBT, same-sex attraction*

### **Introduction**

With over 2.18 billion Christians of all ages around the world, Christianity represents nearly a third of the estimated 2020 global population of 7.8 billion (Current World Population, 2020). Consequently, there have been discussions within communities of faith about coexisting with homosexual people. Just as heterosexual Christians are human, same-sex attracted Christians are similarly human in that they can have faith in Jesus Christ, and have emotional and social experiences and challenges that other Christians go through. Nonetheless, homosexuality within the church remains controversial because of the focus on its potential negative impacts, often overshadowing any positive opportunities. This is evidenced by Trammell (2015), who found that homosexuality remains viewed and discussed as a spiritual problem by religious media for over ten years. Many churches are also not welcoming towards members who are homosexuals, citing religious and cultural differences (e.g., Masson & Nkosi, 2017). Nonetheless, to completely marginalize homosexual people may be rash. Hence, this paper invites members of the community of faith, including pastors, elders, church members, and same-sex attracted Christians, to critically evaluate the core value of churches and understand the reasons for their existence. To achieve this, the paper identifies conducts a biblical exegesis of Romans 1:26-27, which is a biblical passage that is related to homosexuality.

### **Literature Review**

Around the world, there are members of religious communities who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other sexual identities (LGBTQ+) (e.g., in South Africa, Masson & Nkosi, 2017; in Australia, Subhi & Geelan, 2012; in Singapore, Tay, Hoon, & Huy, 2018). Nevertheless, only a fraction of them discuss their sexuality with other church members (Clapp, 2006). Having to repress their sexuality has been found to be a factor that leads to mental illness (Subhi & Geelan, 2012), with non-heterosexuals, especially younger people, being more likely to consider suicide (Gibbs & Goldbach, 2015; Plöderl et al., 2013; Remafedi, 1999). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other sexual identities are at greater risk of depression and substance abuse; nearly one-third (29%) of LGBTQ+ youth had attempted suicide at least once in the prior year, compared with 6% of heterosexual youth (Lyons et al., 2019).

As a result, studies have been conducted to examine and discuss conflicts stemming from homosexuality and the Christian community, with suggestions to address problems of philosophy, theology, and ethics (Nkosi & Masson, 2017). These studies are crucial, as a primary cause of conflict related to homosexual issues in the religious world are interpretations of sacred texts by different religious sects. It can be said that Christians and Muslims, the two main religions which comprise almost half the world's population (Diamant, 2021), usually have a negative view regarding homosexuality (Roggemans et al., 2015). This may have led to inequalities of social ethics and human rights. In Christianity, the problem of homosexuality initially arose from misuse of the writings of the Apostle Paul. Religious leaders may have taken the topic of homosexuality out of its original context (Mohler, 2004). This may have resulted in a divide between fundamentalist Christians and homosexual Christians. Until today, theological debates are still being reported (Prentiss, 2010; Lee & Yi, 2020).

The church has been misunderstood and blamed for the social stigma and suicidal cases among LGBTQ+ members. Some Christian communities may have been guilty of playing God and having a "pharisaical attitude"; the Free Dictionary defines this as "practicing or advocating strict observance of external forms and ceremonies of religion or conduct without regard to the spirit; self-righteous; judgemental". This type of attitude may be traced to the writings of the Apostle Paul, who is one of the most quoted authors with regards to homosexuality in the Christian community. Thus, using the writings of the Apostle Paul, this paper provides an exegetical examination to help provide a space for spiritual discourse regarding homosexual people and Christian faith communities. Specifically, this paper seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How can the Apostle Paul's statements on homosexuality be understood in their context? (Romans 1:26–27, 1 Corinthians 6:9–10, and 1 Timothy 1:9–10.)
2. How can we find a theological balance that will lead to social harmony in this matter?

By addressing these questions, this paper hopes to meet the following research objectives

1. To be able to comprehend Paul's letters in their original context.
2. To help readers understand the mind of the Apostle Paul on the matter of homosexuality.
3. To provide pastoral care guidelines for the issue of homosexuality in the Christian community.

### **Research Methodology**

The study was conducted using biblical exegesis as the method of analysis. This is a tool to provide explanation or critical interpretation of a biblical text. The practice of exegesis is widely employed for addressing theological controversies. The suitability of this method is because of its comprehensiveness and holistic approach, seen through excavation of the following areas (Hays, 2007).

- 1 – General Context
- 2 – Literary Context
- 3 – Lexical-grammatical Context
- 4 – Cultural Context
- 5 – Biblical Context
- 6 – Theological Context

### **Exegesis of Romans 1:26–27 regarding Homosexuality**

Below is an application of exegetical steps applied in Romans 1:26–27. This procedure helps excavate the intention and meaning of Apostle Paul's words. Through the exegetical approach, a theological balance can be achieved.

### ***The Apostle Paul's Background***

Let us first consider the Apostle Paul's background. Before he became a well-known Apostle, he was known as Saul of Tarsus. As a child, he grew up in a Roman province and was a dedicated Jew who inherited Roman citizenship. According to Mark (2019),

Paul was directed to study in Jerusalem and became a prominent member of the Jewish community there (Acts 22:3). When the disciples of Jesus Christ began sharing their new faith, Saul was among their persecutors until he experienced a vision on his way to Damascus in which Jesus spoke to him and he was struck blind (Acts 9:3-9). After recovering his sight with the help of Christians, he became the great evangelist, traveling the Roman roads of Syria-Cilicia Phoenice to spread the new faith.

Tarsus served as an important commercial port in the province of Cilicia, and was famous for its culture of Greek philosophy, literature, and wealth. There were also schools that could rival those found in Athens and Alexandria (Conybeare & Howson, 1976). Paul seemed to be proud of his birthplace, because as he was being arrested, he had said to the Tribune, "I am a Jew and a citizen of the well-known city of Tarsus in Cilicia (Acts 21:39)." The mention of his birthplace may be linked with the city's status as being free, which was accorded by Roman Emperor Augustus for the city's contributions during Rome's civil wars. With the status of being free, cities like Tarsus were given autonomy in terms of instituting their own laws and practicing their own customs. These cities were also free from the heavy presence of Roman guards (Bible Study, n.d.).

Alongside his birthplace, Paul's childhood background and experience impacted his personality, his life, and later his letters to different early churches. For example, Paul's list of vices recorded in Romans 1, 1 Corinthians 9, and 1 Timothy are found to be somewhat similar to the popular moral teachings of the Stoics in his day. Dodd (1952) suggested that the vice lists of Paul may have been used in catechetical instruction from a very early period. According to Springett (1990), Christian thought found precedent for ethical lists in Hellenistic Jewish literature. In such literature, vice lists were abundant—for instance, in the writings of Philo. He gave an excellent example of a vice list found in Wisdom 14.25,26: "Blood and murder, theft and fraud, corruption, faithlessness, tumult, perjury, troubling of good, thankfulness for benefits, defilement of souls, confusion of sex, disorder in marriage, adultery, and wantonness."

Theologians like Abbott (2010) and Hall (2018) suggested that the vices listed in Paul's writings were an echo of Paul's childhood nurturing. They show how Paul uses the words and ideas of a well-known Greek philosopher in his time to help his readers understand more about the gospel he was preaching. However, this is not to suggest that Paul was not inspired by the Holy Spirit, as he wrote his letters to encourage different churches in faith. Throughout the Bible, God uses what is happening in those particular contexts and times to help people understand Him better. According to Judge (1972), though Paul's teachings had much in common with contemporary philosophical thought, they cannot be identified with any philosophical system. Paul rather made use of the popular ethical instruction of the day, not a system of ethics as such, but as a way in which a loose body of general principles for life develops among thoughtful people in a community.

With that said, Paul grew up in a very influential community, which would later have a huge impact on his life. Yet as a committed Jew, what might have influenced Paul most would have been the Torah and Hebrew Scriptures. His spiritual commitment and obligation to his religion could be major factors that impacted his life and his writings. This theme will be discussed in greater detail later in this paper.

### **Exploring Bible Texts on Homosexuality**

There are four passages in the New Testament that deal with homosexuality. Three from the works of the Apostle Paul, penned by his assistants like Tertius, and one from Jude, the brother of James, referring to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19. The following are other Bible verses that refer to homosexuality: Genesis 19:4–5, Judges 19:22, Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 20:13, Ezekiel 16:48–50, Romans 1:26–27, 1 Corinthians 6:9–10, 1 Timothy 1:9–11, and Jude 1:7.

### ***Brief Historical Context***

The book of Romans was written around A.D. 57. This book was authored by the Apostle Paul with the help of a scribe named Tertius. At the time it was written, Paul was on his third missionary journey, and his work in the eastern Mediterranean had almost come to an end. Paul was now ready to return

to Jerusalem with a gift of financial resources from the believers in Macedonia and Achaia to assist the poor believers in Jerusalem (Romans 16:25-26). The place where Paul wrote the book of Romans is either Corinth or Cenchrea, which are less than 10 kilometers apart.

### ***Literary Context***

Paul's original audience was the church in Rome whose members were predominantly Gentile Christians (Romans 1:7). Jews were the minority in this community of faith. Paul expressed a strong desire to visit the Roman church (Romans 1:8-16). For many years, he had longed to be there with these believers, but he was obligated to deliver monetary gifts to the poorer members in Jerusalem. Hence, instead of going to Rome, he prepared the Christians thereby sending his letter ahead through a woman named Phoebe before his visit. As was the custom of that time, according to Todstad (2018), the person who carried the letter was the one who would read it out loud.

One could imagine that Sister Phoebe carried Paul's letter from one house to the next in Rome. It could have been that some members might have wanted to reread the letter, and so they began to copy and circulate it. Theologically speaking, the letter to the Romans was a systematic theological introduction to his hoped-for future personal ministry. Since Paul was not acquainted directly with the believers in Rome, he says little about their problems (Barker, 1995) when compared to the Corinthians, with whom he was better acquainted because he had spent at least 1.5 years at Corinth. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul mentioned the problems of specific individuals, but such was not the case with his letter to the Christians in Rome.

Even though Paul had not been acquainted with the believers in Rome, he did mention some of the universal problems that believers faced throughout the Greek world. Greek civilization had a big impact on the world, and the Romans had inherited much of their culture and lifestyle from the Greeks. One social norm that had been passed down to Roman society was homosexuality (Levin-Richardson, 2019). This may be one of the distinct problem areas where the Christians in Rome were being challenged. Sexuality has always been an area where God's people struggle and are challenged throughout history. Several incidents in the Old Testament and in the Torah remind us that God's people were frequently tempted to worship the gods and goddesses of the Canaanites. This was very tempting, because part of the requirement of Canaanite worship was to have sexual intercourse with a priest or goddess. Those acts of worship were an abomination to the God of Israel. However, a careful exegesis of Romans chapters 1 and 2 reveals that the situation in the book of Romans was different from the case of the Israelites in the Old Testament. More details will be presented later, in the "Literary Structure" section of this paper.

### ***Genre***

One of the most important aspects of the interpretation of Scripture is genre. Exegesis requires that one can differentiate between various kinds of writings. As Schreiner (2018, p. 44) stated, "If we misunderstand the genre of a text, the rest of our analysis will be askew." In this case, the question to ask is whether the book of Romans is a letter or an epistle? The Gospels, Letters, and the Apocalypse are written in different literary genres and serve different purposes. The question to ask is, why did Paul write the Romans a letter rather than a Gospel? Many scholars agree that Paul wrote Romans as a letter, but there is no real consensus as to what kind of letter it is.

There is a difference between an epistle and a letter. An epistle is usually understood to be for everyone or a large group of audience. On the other hand, a letter is usually meant for an individual or a small group of individuals. This is what the immediate readers of the Church of Rome had to decide, as do readers today. Historical records that in A.D. 49, Emperor Claudius expelled all the Jews from Rome, and as a result of this exodus, there were also almost no Christians left in Rome. According to the Roman historian Tacitus, this was because the Jews were always fighting about 'Christos'—a reference to the ongoing conflict between Jewish Christians (such as Aquila and Priscilla) and traditional Orthodox Jews. This is one piece of evidence that Paul's message to the Romans was more of a letter than an epistle.

The letter of Romans was written in A.D. 57. Claudius died in A.D. 54, three years before the letter was written. After Claudius died, the brutal Nero succeeded him on the throne. Nero harbored a strong dislike of Christians. These historical facts help us see that there may not have been many Christians left in Rome, except for those who were caught by the Romans soldiers from different regions for entertainment in the Coliseum. Paul must have had this information in mind when he wrote this letter to the few people in Rome. During this time of trauma and persecution, there was no time for Paul to waste on the smaller issue of homosexuality. But instead, he wanted to encourage those few people in Rome who were being persecuted for Jesus Christ. That is why later in his letter, in Romans Chapter 8, Paul reassured the Christians in Rome that nothing could separate them from the love of God, even their sins, because Jesus has covered all for them.

### ***Major Theme***

The major theme helps readers to focus on the central issues in the letter without losing track when bombarded with details along the way. Paul's primary theme in Romans is the basic gospel, God's plan of salvation and righteousness for all humankind, Jew and Gentile alike. Readers may be lost and overwhelmed with information, but the major theme serves as the North Star that guides them home.

### ***Literary Structure***

The literal structure provides an overview of the biblical writer's thought flow. To understand the matter of homosexuality in the letter to the Romans, it is necessary to gain ability to see the whole thought flow of the entire letter. This helps to determine what is important to the author, what is not so important, and what are the main messages that he wants to convey. To make a balanced judgment on the matter of homosexuality, it is suggested that prior prejudices be set aside first. In this case, the conclusion that Apostle Paul condemns every kind of homosexuality is not necessarily viable simply because homosexuality is mentioned in Romans Chapter 1. Instead, it is necessary to see the whole trend of his thought and theology, as the literary structure helps to highlight the big picture and the whole frame of thought in the mind of the Apostle Paul. With regards to the details surrounding Romans 1:26–27 where homosexuality is mentioned, a mini literal structure of Romans 1:18–3:20 has been prepared and constructed to provide a bird's eye overview of the structure of the text.

### ***The Universality of Human Sinfulness***

- A. God's Wrath against the Gentiles (1:18–32)
  - 1. Their rejection of God's revelation of himself 1:18–20
  - 2. Divine retribution for deliberate sin (1:21–31)
  - 3. Conclusion: they both sin and approved of a sinner (1:32)
- B. God's Wrath against the Jews (2:1–3:8)
  - 1. The truth of God's judgment on the Jews (2:1–16)
  - 2. The Jewish failure to keep the law (2:17–29)
  - 3. God's faithfulness and Israel's failure (3:1–8)
- C. The Sinfulness of All Humanity (3:9–20)
  - 1. The universal nature of sin (3:9)
  - 2. The extent of human depravity: total (3:10–18)
  - 3. The universality of sin (3:19–20)

This structure underscores a clearer understanding of the mind of the Apostle Paul. He is trying to point out that every single human is a sinner, and all deserve the wrath of God. Singling out one particular sin in this section of the letter is not the author's intention. By doing so, one is committing the sin of deviating from the actual biblical message.

### ***A Closer Look***

Towards the end of Romans Chapter 1, Paul is condemning the Gentiles for their sin of dishonoring God. “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened” (Rom. 1:21, NIV). Paul’s premise is that every human knows that there is a Creator God (Romans 1:19–24). Paul goes into detail about the sins they committed in verses 25–32.

Paul tried to point out that even people who do not know God may learn about Him by observing nature around them. Intuitively they know that there is a divine being. They have made all kinds of gods from wood, rock, and stone into different animal shapes and worship them. They intentionally worshiped created beings like animals and nature instead of the Creator. That is why Paul mentions that they have exchanged the truth for lies. So God gave them up to do shameful things.

Despite this, the Gentiles claimed to be wise, and we can see why. The Greeks developed a great concentration of philosophical and medical "wisdom," but their lifestyle and culture was incredibly depraved. Worldly wisdom is not the same as divine truth, so amid all their knowledge they "became fools." Their pretension to worldly wisdom proved itself to be foolishness, because they worshipped, first, themselves, and second, false gods (Osborne, 2017, p. 6). Moreover, according to Osborne (2017), in his literal context, Paul is talking about a group of non-Christian Gentiles—specifically, the Greeks who lived in Rome. Paul might refer to the different sects of philosophers like the Epicureans and Stoics as well, according to the evidence of a previous conversation with them in Acts Chapter 17. However, the main purpose of pointing this out is to systematically reveal that nobody has an excuse for or can escape from sin. Not even the non-Christian Gentiles, who claimed that they did not know God. After pointing this out, Apostle Paul analytically shifted his focus back to the believers, Christians. The literal structure shows us that Paul is building a theology that points to soteriology in Jesus Christ. In Chapter 2, Paul makes it even worse for the Christian believers. The believers in this context were quite certain that they were good people, and righteous enough to judge the sinful Gentiles who had committed shameful acts. These believers had developed a spirit of hypocrisy like that of the Pharisees. Paul turned to this group of believers and said,

You may think you can condemn such people, but you are just as bad, and you have no excuse!  
When you say they are wicked and should be punished, you are condemning yourself, for you who judge others do these very same things. (Romans 2:1 NLT)

What “same things” did they do? Did they do exactly what the non-Christian Gentiles did in Chapter 1? Paul gives us a hint in verse 5 that they are stubborn, and by refusing to turn from sin, they are storing up terrible punishment for themselves. This is to point out that Christian Gentile believers are no different from non-believers. Likewise, they all committed sin; it might just be sin in a different form.

And lastly, in this structure, Paul directs his attention to the Jews who claimed to have a special relationship with God and know what is right. These people were not just normal Jewish citizens, but leaders and teachers of the law. They were convinced that they were guides for the blind and lights for people who were lost in darkness. These people claimed that they could instruct the ignorant and teach children the ways of God (Romans 2:19–20 NLT). But Paul pointed out that they were not living what they taught and preached. These leaders taught against idolatry, yet they were using items stolen from pagan temples (Romans 2:22). They knew every bit of the law, yet failed to uphold and keep it. So Paul in Romans 2:25 said to these people that they were no better off than the uncircumcised Gentiles. They may have appeared to be holy and righteous, but their hearts were not right with God.

For you are not a true Jew just because you were born of Jewish parents or because you have gone through the ceremony of circumcision. No, a true Jew is one whose heart is right with God. And true circumcision is not merely obeying the letter of the law; rather, it is a change of heart produced by the Spirit. And a person with a changed heart seeks praise from God, not from people. (Romans 2:28-29 NLT)

### **Macro Literary Structure**

The macrostructure of Romans 1:18-3:20 supplies context to the statement in Romans 1:26-27 regarding homosexuality, and can be summed up as shown below.

Romans 1:18–24 Paul points out the problem of the sins of the “Gentiles” (non-Christians).

Romans 1:25–31 Paul elaborates the sins of the Gentiles (homosexuality is one of those)

Romans 1:32 Paul emphasizes the consequence of sin (death)

Romans 2:1–4 Paul points out the problem of sins of the “Gentile Christians” (Church members).

Romans 2:1–3 Paul highlights the sin of being judgmental

Romans 2:5 Paul discusses the sin of being stubborn and refusing to turn from the wrong (Ego)

Romans 2:16 Paul emphasizes the consequence of sin (God’s judgment)

Romans 2:17–24 Paul points out the problem of the sins of the “Jews” (Religious Leaders)

Romans 2:17–20 Paul describes how they perceived themselves to be teachers of the law. (Ego)

Romans 2:21–25 Paul shows how they fail to live what they teach/preach.

Romans 2:24 Paul emphasizes the consequence of sin (the Gentiles blaspheme the name of God)

The Gentiles (non-believers), the believers (Christians), and the Jews (Religious leaders) represent the universality of humanity. Paul simply points out that “everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glorious standard” Romans 3:23. The purpose of the law is to keep people from having an excuse and to show that the entire world is guilty before God. The law simply shows us how sinful we are (Romans 3:19–20). The macrostructure above enables readers to see that Paul’s intention is not to single out one particular sin, or a particular group of people. Homosexuality is neither the main focus nor the main theme. It is not an appropriate text to single out and use against homosexual people. To apply Romans Chapters 1–3 in context, Scripture should be handled fairly, used against all human brokenness, and allowed to point broken persons to the greatest Healer, Jesus Christ. However, since this study is dealing with Apostle Paul’s thoughts on homosexuality, therefore, we need to explore Romans 1:26–27 and examine it in depth.

### **Grammatical Study**

Before getting into the specific word study, it is important to make one general observation. It is important to note that language usage by the writer helps to unveil hidden details; it provides an understanding of the immediate context.

In Chapter 1:1–17, Paul uses the grammatical 2<sup>nd</sup> person “you” to address the audience. In grammar, a person is used to show the relationship between the speaker and the audience, or the writer and the reader. Grammar can also reveal possessive relationships. In this case, Paul is using 2<sup>nd</sup> person to address the audience who are believers. It shows their intimacy as brothers and sisters in Christ, even though they had never met. It is an agreement that they are of the same mind and the same faith, a mutual understanding of the same ethical code.

In Romans 1:18–32 the use of grammatical person shifts to the 3<sup>rd</sup> person, and the tone has also changed. (In reading scripture, it should be kept in mind that originally there were no chapters or verses. The division of the Bible into chapters and verses came later in A.D. 1551 by Robertus Stephanus). The shifting of grammatical person and change in tone suggests that Paul intended to make a distinct separation between believers and non-believers. In this context, he uses the 3<sup>rd</sup> person to point to another group of people who do not belong to the immediate audience. The Greek and Roman homosexuals belong to this 3<sup>rd</sup> person group which Paul addresses. This means some moral standards and worldviews may be different from place to place, religion to religion, culture to culture, and people to people.

However, right after Romans Chapter 1 in Chapter 2, Paul shifts the grammatical person back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> person, and continues to address his main audience. This continues to the end of Chapter 16. When listing the sins of unbelievers, including homosexual sin in Chapter 1, he uses the 3<sup>rd</sup> person to point to the Gentiles. Afterwards, Paul only uses the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> persons like brother and sister, us, we,

I, and you throughout the remainder of his letter. Moreover, in Chapter 16, Paul even addresses some believers in Rome by name: for instance, Priscilla and Aquila. “This couple is mentioned in Acts 18:2, 18:18a, and 18:26 as associates of Paul and helpers to Apollos. Apparently, they were now back in the city of Rome” (Guzik, 2018). This shows the intimacy between Paul and some members of his original audience, which is in contrast to the group of people whom he mentioned and condemned in Chapter 1. This provides some clues and hints that will be elaborated further in the next section.

### ***Sexuality in Rome during the Time of Paul***

Sexuality in Rome during the time of Paul was greatly influenced by Greek civilization. However, when compared to the modern Internet era, many views and practices related to sexuality have evolved. People have had different expectations and appreciation for sex according to the emergence of different social structures over time.

Normally the basic thought about sex in the mind of the Roman citizen was “active dominant masculine” vs. “passive submissive feminine” (Williams, 2010). In this kind of culture, men were the dominant authorities. They held social privilege, ethical power, political seat, and all legal papers. Freeborn males were the ones who ruled the house. Since the Romans were always in military campaigns, the conquest mentality, therefore, had a great influence when it came to ruling the household. To use an exact description, masculine pride drove society and sexual relations.

Roman men were free to enjoy sex with other males without a perceived loss of masculinity or social status, as long as they took the dominant or penetrative role. Acceptable male partners were slaves and former slaves, prostitutes, and entertainers, whose lifestyle placed them in the nebulous social realm of *infamy*, excluded from the normal protections accorded a citizen even if they were technically free. Although Roman men, in general, seem to have preferred youths between the ages of 12 and 20 as sexual partners, freeborn male minors were off-limits at certain periods in Rome, though professional prostitutes and entertainers might remain sexually available well into adulthood (Williams, 2010, p. 118).

It was expected and socially acceptable for a freeborn Roman man to want sex with both female and male partners, as long as he took the penetrative role (Richlin, 1992). It was immoral to have sex with another freeborn man's wife, his marriageable daughter, his underage son, or with the man himself, while sexual use of another man's slave was subject to the owner's permission. Lack of self-control, including in managing one's sex life, indicated that a man was incapable of governing others. Too much indulgence in "low sensual pleasure" threatened to erode the elite male's identity as a cultured person (Hallett, 1998, pp. 67–68).

However, there is something worth noticing on the woman's side. According to Minor (2014), same-sex activity between a woman and other women was quite rare (p. 212). It was uncommon in Roman society, which differed from that of the Greeks, where it was so uncommon that an ancient poet in the time of Augustine said that sexual activity between women was "unheard-of" (Skinner, 2014, p. 69). This is a reminder of what the Apostle Paul penned in Romans 1:26 “This is why God delivered them over to degrading passions. For even their females exchanged natural sexual intercourse for what is unnatural.” Paul was writing this letter to warn the Christians in Rome, and he mentioned that females had exchanged natural sexual intercourse for what was unnatural, which seems to contradict contemporary findings. One said sexual activity between women and women was rare, while another stated that it was not uncommon. Perhaps it might have been a linguistic or biblical figurative language problem, or it could be that some women were engaging in (unnatural) masturbation activity, instead of having normal sex with their husbands. According to Genesis 38, there was a man named Onan who did not follow God’s command to have natural sex with his sister-in-law whose husband had passed away. Instead, Onan masturbated and ejaculated outside the body of the woman, resulting in God punishing him with death. Romans 1:26 and Genesis 38 may seem to be in a different context and time, but they are worth noting.

Sometimes it is difficult to define the word common or uncommon. In the world we live in, sex between men and men or women and women seems to be much more open than in ancient Rome.

But when the majority of the earth's population are straight, it could be said that it is relatively uncommon. The same goes with ancient Rome; something that is allowable does not mean that it is commonly done as the norm.

Another piece of evidence that provides insights into the sexual culture of the Roman world is the excavation of Pompeii. The Pompeian culture was infused with sexuality, which manifested itself in all aspects of everyday life. For one thing, the Romans' sexual practices were quite open; they did not require a sense of privacy. In the modern world, we think of privacy as the most important thing about sexual activity; hence, sexual activities would be hidden away from public spaces. However, this was not the case in Pompeii. Sexual activity could happen anywhere between the dining table and the bedroom, and guests were meant to see it and see their host as a man of taste and refinement. Furthermore, sexual imagery could be seen everywhere. Not only was it found in fine art or inside the house, but it was also found throughout the streets of Pompeii. To the people in Pompeii, this imagery represented good luck and fortune (Levin-Richardson, 2019).

Another occurrence that was distasteful to the God of the Jews and Christians was ancient shrine worship (Deuteronomy 23:17–18). This was a religious practice that had been around for thousands of years where worshipers would get themselves drunk with wine and have sexual intercourse with the temple priest. This included male-to-male sexual intercourse. In addition, travelers who came to the temple of Aphrodite would say the goddess's name before having intercourse with her temple maids. Having sex with strangers was not only possible but obligatory (Marcovich, 1996). According to the Greek historian Herodotus, writing about the city of Cyprus in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century B.C., "The foulest Babylonian custom is that which compels every woman of the land to sit in the temple of Aphrodite and have intercourse with some stranger at least once in her life" (Anagnostou-Laoutides & Charles, 2018). This applied to all women, high and low, he says, though rich ladies often drove to the temple in covered carriages. This kind of culture and civilization affords a clearer view of why the Apostle Paul seems to be against all kinds of sexual immorality. That was because it was happening everywhere in Rome and contradicted his religious beliefs and background. As an ex-Pharisee and a leading Christian figure, Paul taught a different moral standard than the Romans. Herodotus added, "A woman could not refuse payment. Once a stranger had made his choice and cast money into her lap, she would be forced to have intercourse outside the temple" (Watson, 2016).

With such information, it is hardly surprising that Paul uses such strong words against the people who participated in such practices. This goes hand in hand with how the Old Testament condemned male cult prostitutes or male shrine prostitutes in Deuteronomy 23:17, 1 Kings 14:24, 1 Kings 15:12. This leads to the question, "were there any genuine Christians in Rome who participated in the shrine worship?" The answer is most likely "No". This means homosexual activity that happened in the shrine worship was something different than what same-sex attracted Christians experience today. To compare and use the analogy of homosexual activity in the temple of Aphrodite is baseless. What happened in the temple of Aphrodite involved people who had no relationship with Jesus, and was very different from the experience of same-sex attracted Christians.

### ***Same-Sex Marriage in Ancient Rome***

When same-sex marriage in ancient Rome was discussed, the usual connotation was male-to-male marriage. There are very few records of same-sex marriage in ancient Rome, and it usually involved a small informal wedding. The legal system of ancient Rome did not recognize same-sex marriage. One of the reasons was so that children from heterosexual marriages could continue the family name and father's legacy. Same-sex marriage was considered something bizarre. The couple could be mocked for having a same-sex marriage (Hersch, 2010). Later, when the emperor Constantine became a Christian, homosexuality declined and same-sex marriage in the Roman Empire was prohibited. However, during the time of the Apostle Paul, Emperor Nero had two public wedding ceremonies with men. The first one was with a wine steward, a man named Pythagoras who used to be a slave, during which Nero took the role of the bride even though this was against traditional beliefs and social norms. The other wedding was with a young man named Sporus; here the Emperor took the role of the groom.

The Emperor later ordered him to be castrated in an attempt to keep his youthful appearance. The wedding included customary aspects like an endowment and the wearing of the Roman bridal veil (Williams, 2010). This is another important piece of evidence about the situation in Rome that could have shaped the context and message in Romans Chapter 1.

### ***Political Situation Relates to the Book of Romans***

The letter of Romans was written around A.D. 57. The letter's purpose was to encourage the local Christians and establish a theological foundation for church members in Rome. Christians were a minority in the city of Rome. There were no rules or laws that protected Christians' rights during this period.

Since its beginning, the Roman Empire was a committed religious culture. Religion and politics usually went hand in hand. Emperor Julius Caesar was the highest priest in the temple of Jupiter (Pontifex Maximus) before he was elected as Consul, the highest Republican political role (Ricketts, 2020). The Romans worshipped a large constellation of deities, some of whom were passed down from the Ancient Greeks, and the city was filled with shrines and temples. People at every level sought to participate in paying homage to these gods. Thailand is a good example of a modern society that, like the Romans, still exhibits a deep connection between people, business, and politics. Most of the houses and businesses, big and small, usually have a local shrine display in front, for people to pay homage to that which is sacred, while asking for protection, success, and luck. The Roman emperor became a god to many Romans, an idea Christians were to later find highly offensive.

On the other side, theological clashes and debates between the Jews, Christians, and Romans created a lot of tension, which gave rise to several protests and violence. This led the central government to take a negative view of the Jews and the Christians. Claudius Caesar was the emperor in A.D. 49 at the time of a famine that prompted Saul and Barnabas to take a gift from the church in Antioch to the Christians in Jerusalem (Acts 11:27–30). Claudius later expelled all the Jews from Rome. According to the Roman historian Tacitus, this was because the Jews were always fighting about 'Christos'—a reference to the ongoing conflict between Jewish Christians (such as Aquila and Priscilla) and traditional Orthodox Jews (Campbell, n.d.). This historical evidence indicates that numerous Christians must have been living in Rome at that time to cause an uproar between the Christian and the Jews. The names of people listed in Romans 16 supports the idea that there were a large number of Christians and churches in the city before the expulsion decree.

After the murder of Claudius by his fellow Senate members, the throne passed to his teenage stepson, Nero. At the age of 17, Nero inherited the throne and became the emperor of the Roman Empire. He was a violent psychopathic ruler. His taste for sexuality was considered extreme and different from that of other rulers before him. One of Nero's political initiatives was to set his city on fire in A.D. 64. He deflected blame on the Christians in order to justify rebuilding a new city with a golden palace and bronze statues of himself, hoping to gain more popularity. But things did not go as he wished; he started to lose popularity and favor from the people. Nero started to send Christians and slaves to their deaths in the amphitheater as entertainment for Roman citizens. This was also a factor leading to the Roman-Jewish war in A.D. 66 (The Infographics Show, 2019). Biblical history in Acts 25:11 reveals that the Apostle Paul used his Roman citizenship right to appeal to Emperor Nero in A.D. 57. This was probably the same year he authored the book of Romans while in Corinth.

### ***The Critical Question***

The historical information above raises certain critical questions. How many Christians or Christian Jews were left in Rome? With all the hardship and persecution that was happening, was there still time to focus on these Christian gay or homosexual topics and theological debate? It could have been that in a critical time of continued crisis such as this, most likely the Christians in Rome were focusing on how to physically and spiritually survive each day in times of heavy persecution. The condemnation of unnatural sex in Romans 1:26–27 is not pointing to Christians, but rather to the norms of Roman society. The text is not even a warning to Christians in Rome; it simply refers to the behavior of those

who were not Christian. And by “behavior”, it means sexuality in Rome during the early 1<sup>st</sup> century, in the context of a society that tied its existence to a hyper-masculine culture with all its gods and shrines. As discussed in the literary section above, Paul tried to warn the Christians in Rome not to live sinful lives which contradicted the gospel of Jesus Christ as did the pagans. However, Paul was positioning his message to build his grand theology (all are sinners and in need of a Savior). In the second and third chapters of Romans, Paul points out that even the Jews and Christians are sinners too, no matter how good they think they are.

### Summary

1. In such a crisis there was no time to worry about a theology of homosexuality and Christianity in this historical context. There might not even be enough Christians left in Rome after the Jews and Christians were expelled and Nero’s subsequent reign.
2. The condemnation of unnatural sex is targeting a hyper-masculine Roman society, not the homosexual Christians of today. Today, believers face many more complications as they live in different contexts with different challenges, face different issues in distinct societies, and have diverse understandings and outlooks towards life.

### Conclusion

With the specific homosexual issues during Paul’s time, there is no question or ambiguity as to why he seemed to take a negative view of homosexuality. Every homosexual story recorded in the Old Testament involved violation and caused the loss of someone’s life. It always had to do with excessive lust and sinful passion, which caused the degrading of a human being.

On the other hand, homosexual issues in Paul’s time were centered on knowledge and power, as Foucault noted regarding the role of sex in Greek and Roman antiquity (Foucault, 1978). The element of true love according to the creation account had been done away. There are 7 words for love in Greek, but homosexual activity during Paul’s time seemed to involve only the lower forms of love such as eros, ludus, philautia, or at most philia, but it leaves out the higher types like storge, pragma, and agápe. It is the higher level of love that God demands from his children. It could be argued that when Paul mentioned homosexuality in the vice list of Romans 1, his deeper intention was to target any person who practiced lower kinds of love. Because that was the specific trend of homosexuality during Paul’s time.

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