

A few things we know about our author and letter, as a reminder:

1. Our author is Paul the Apostle
 - a. He's grown up very Jewish and risen to the ranks of a Pharisee, however he is not culturally exclusive in his approach to life.
 - i. He's learned of Greek culture and the Hellenized world, and even quotes from Epicurean poets while speaking with his audience at Mars Hill in Athens, (Acts 17).

This background for his life helps modern readers avoid “pigeon holing” a person assuming they only see life through one lens.

2. He's writing to a church in Rome to which he's never been yet has many friends and acquaintances living in the city as seen through his most extensive greeting at the end of this letter in Romans 16.
 - a. Rome is a booming city and will become the hub of a global empire for nearly 1000 years. This church family is the roots of the Greco-Roman western church which will later give shape to much of global Christianity in the next two millennia.
3. He is living in Corinth during the time of this writing surrounded by culturally and morally debauched people. The dysfunctional church in Corinth is his daily project where Paul is living out and seeing God work out the very doctrines of grace he walks through Romans.

After a greeting and an introduction, a thesis for his letter is found in 1:16, 17, “being unashamed of the Gospel of Christ because it is the power of God to save humanity”, he then moves directly into his content.

With the backdrop of a pagan world where many are given over to vice and “shameful lusts”, he explains how the wrath of God will come to those who silence the conviction of the Holy Spirit. This conviction is from the general revelation and / or the specific revelation from our Creator. Those who ignore these promptings enter a downward degradation with hardened hearts wherein they practice Scriptural suppression.

Verse 24 expresses the driving desires of peoples' lust have a causal effect wherein impurity lends itself to bodily “dishonoring”. This because of people having “blocked out” the witness of the Spirit. The blocking of the witness of Creation and the overall moral conscience God has graciously given man results in an “exchange”. Men change proper worship of an Almighty God for the lesser and begin to worship things God has made. Created objects either living or inanimate are still only created things. When men “worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator...” these idolatrous practices lead further into depraved behaviors even resulting in performing acts which nature itself shows to be un-lawful.

Verse 26 speaks of the second “giving up” from God. Women exchange the natural order as seen from the book of Genesis and likewise men exchange this same testimony found in biology and the natural sciences for self-seeking pleasure. These “dishonorable passions” (ESV), elsewhere translated, “shameful lusts” (NIV) and

“vile affections” (NKJV) have an additional causal effect wherein “due penalty” is recompensed for this “error”.

The feelings of shame manifest themselves many times with hiding. Hiding sin and foolishness because of the feelings of shame was the immediate reaction of Adam and Eve at the first disobedient act against the Creator. These feelings of shame are an internal barometer when humans do what is wrong. This is a gift for the unbeliever when interpreted correctly as a method to point the human conscience toward God.

Verse 27 speaks of “passions” which is the Greek word “pathos”. Much of human pathos is amoral. We are gifted with passions for art and architecture, gardening, writing, poetry, exploration, friendships and many things which make life beautiful, yet they in themselves are neutral. The expressions of human individualistic pathos are a delight to be shared and enjoyed. When our passions are elevated to a place of idolatry within the human soul, *then* chaos ensues. Relationships are broken; the worship of God and the joy of these passions becomes marred.

The downward degradation of suppressing Scripture has led men, as seen in verse 27, to become “enflamed”, “burning”, with a passion for other men to participate in sexual acts together. Paul uses the Greek word ὄρεξις (*orexis*) which has a single use in the New Testament. It is the strongest word possible describing the lust of appetite and sex-drive. The common word for “lust” is ἐπιθυμία (*epithymia*) which is used 38 times in the NT. The Greek philosophers admired the citizen who could control his *epithymatic* drives hence living a more virtuous life. This is an extreme example the apostle Paul uses to explain how far humanity has moved away from proper worship of our Creator and thus, can be given over to these vices.

Participation in any idolatrous practice will always be recompensed with “error”. Because of continual suppression, the mechanism of feeling shame has now resulted in feeling “shame-less”. Humanity can be so given over to the lust of their flesh that dishonoring their bodies becomes a perverted expression of self-defined freedom. The natural consequence of idol worship *regardless* of the object is “error”.

Again, the three-step process for all humanity:

1. The embracing of a lie and suppressing the truth, i.e....
 - a. God hasn’t forbid “this”
 - b. I feel like I should have it, therefor God wants this for me
 - c. There is no Creator to whom I’m accountable
2. Idolatry of heart
 - a. My pleasure is the most important thing
 - b. Success as I define it, or attaining “that thing” has captivated all my passion
 - c. Happiness will be found once I spend time with, own, touch, etc. something other than God
3. The exchange
 - a. The line has been crossed and I fully embrace idolatry which bears negative fruit
 - i. My mental health is suffering due to non-repentance of sin
 - ii. My physical health is suffering due to consequence of vice
 - iii. Personal relationships are broken because my desires have trumped care of people

This final stage is the fruit of planted seeds. “Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.” (Galatians 6:7) The “penalty” from verse 27 is the word for “payment” and is what one is owed as a result of the “error”. The word “error” can be expressed more in depth:

- a wandering, a straying about
 - one led astray from the right way, roams hither and thither
- metaphor meaning:
 - mental straying
 - error, wrong opinion relative to morals or religion
 - error which shows itself in action, a wrong mode of acting
 - error, that which leads into error, deceit or fraud

Subsequently, the “payment” for suppressing the truth is wondering from wisdom and God’s safety. Paul is illustrating this with the picture of unnatural sexual relationships. However, many humans and even Christians active in the church have struggled, or currently do struggle with unnatural sexual relationships, or same-sex-attraction.

This is not the end of the application –

This applies to any idol of our heart which causes us to wonder from wisdom:

The Spirit convicts humanity of many issues of the heart:

- You’re drinking too much
- You’re eating too much
- You’re watching too much T.V.
- You’re getting to work late because you’re staying up too late
- You’re working too many hours, etc....

What all people need to know lest any of us place others upon a spiritual pedestal:

- **Many misguided passions we can list are things with which humans have struggled, or do struggle, including leaders within our local faith communities.**

This is why Ray Ortlund of Immanuel Church in Nashville, Tennessee, speaks of creating a culture within the local church described as ***the Gospel + Safety + Time.***

Can the local church be a place wherein a person may say, “I feel safe here”? Are we creating environments where deep issues of the heart can be confessed? Can our leaders reveal their own humanity?

Hebrews 5:1-3 “For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness. Because of this he is obligated to offer sacrifice for his own sins just as he does for those of the people.” (ESV)

The operative phrase is “he himself is beset with weakness.” The author of Hebrews intentionally describes the human representative for God, the priest or modern day pastor and says they are “beset” with weakness.

περίκειμαι (*perikeimai*) translated “beset” ESV, “subject” NIV, or “compassed” KJV, is a word meaning:

to lie all around, i.e. enclose, encircle, hamper (literally or figuratively) be bound (compassed) with, hang about or even, in submission to

If our local church cannot be safe for all people clinging to the Gospel message, sarcastically speaking, perhaps a more appropriate name should be *Highland Moral Community*.

However, if we can truly be honest believing God loves us for who we are, where we are, and is not just willing, but faithful to change us, then we can be patient with one another. Our name, *Highland Gospel Community*, is the best expression of the culture we seek to create within this local church. A community of people gathered in equality humbly submitted to the good news of salvation.

Looking back at Romans, Paul uses the example of unnatural homosexual relationships to show how idol worship in the human heart perverts even the very essence of God's Creation.

This is where the "Church" (big C) has lost credibility. The emphasis on *moralism* shifted the focus towards *outward behavior* and away from *inward depravity*.

The first of which is often "fixed" with **behavior modification**, typically negative reinforcement:

- be stronger
- stop lusting
- stop looking
- stop being gay
- this is your choice and you need to ... "make better choices"

The latter – *inward depravity* is when we see ourselves as equals sharing humanity with all and recognizing each person suffers the same. In this manner, we can be more generous with God's grace knowing that total depravity has ransacked *all* human hearts.

This enables the church to **Receive instead of Reject**.

Because the Church has at times past spent a lot of time rejecting *behavior*, those outside the Christian family have misunderstood the grace of God as seen in the famous quote by Mahatma Ghandi, "I love Christ, but not Christians, because they are not like their Christ"

One example of this treatment in the Church was illustrated by Dwight Carlson in the February 9th, 1998 issue of Christianity Today titled, **Exposing the Myth That Christians Should Not Have Emotional Problems**

"The only army that shoots its wounded is the Christian army," said the speaker, a psychologist who had just returned from an overseas ministry trip among missionaries. He summed up the philosophy of the group he worked with as:

- 1. We don't have emotional problems. If any emotional difficulties appear to arise, simply deny having them.*
- 2. If we fail to achieve this first ideal and can't ignore a problem, strive to keep it from family members and never breathe a word of it outside the family.*
- 3. If both of the first two steps fail, still don't seek professional help.*

I have been a Christian for 50 years, a physician for 29, and a psychiatrist for 15. Over this time I have observed these same attitudes throughout the church—among lay leaders, pastors, priests, charismatics, fundamentalists, and evangelicals alike. I have also found that many not only deny their problems but are

intolerant of those with emotional difficulties. Many judge that others' emotional problems are the direct result of personal sin. This is a harmful view.

Although we do suffer as a result of our personal sin, as laid out by Paul here in Romans one, the bigger illustration is the way in which the church has in some places responded to this suffering.

People often fear what we don't understand. When another human struggles with an issue of the heart with which we are unfamiliar this is frequently a place where judgmental thoughts take root. Instead of seeking to cross the bridge of understanding we are, at times, quick to shun or shame, or simply ignore. This behavior has left myriad humans suffering alone in the world searching for fixes to the human condition apart from the only true fix which is the Gospel of grace and the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation to the Creator.

When I was eight years old my step-father asked if I would like to go flying with a friend of his. I remember thinking about it for a week or more until that Saturday morning came around. He made one more invite and I remember adamantly refusing to go with him. Only years later did my immature mind come to realize the airplane was not as I imagined... something along the line of Snoopy and his Red Barron fighter. In my youthful brain, I was afraid of falling out of the plane thinking we would be in an open top 1930's bomber with goggles and a brown leather cap covering our ears!

In a similar way, the very word that has been given as a label to the evangelical church, *Homophobic*, is unfortunately too true.

The fact that this idea has manifested into the concept that "God hates gays" is saddening.

Jesus modeled the behavior His disciples should follow in two great illustrations with sexually broken people. The first being the woman at the well in John 4. In summary, Jesus expressed to this woman:

"I know you've had five husbands and you're living in adultery now" ... "actually I know everything about you. Everything!" ... "even the stuff you'd never want anyone to know about."

Jesus' conversation with this woman in broad daylight and full public view expressed something remarkable:

"I won't shun you, humiliate you, for God didn't send me into the world to bring condemnation on them, heaven knows, you feel condemned already, you don't need someone else heaping more."

The other sexually broken person is the woman caught in adultery found in John 8. In this story the Savior is pit between the religious rulers who propagated a very strict adherence to the law of Moses yet showed little mercy for those in need, and a woman who was technically guilty and condemned to death. In human form, the God who created us spoke to the hearts of those present and invited any sinless persons to begin the killing of the guilty woman. After they had all departed, realizing there were no sinless men among them, His words were simply, "where are your accusers? Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more."

It is with this backdrop and understanding we should address the issues of our day dealing with our fellow humans who seek to know Christ. This disregards the political agendas and large swathing movements collective thinking groups seek to push upon their fellow citizens. Paul is dealing with, as is Jesus, individual humanity and the human condition we all find ourselves prone to: idolatry. As John Calvin stated, "the heart is an idol factory."

By way of educating the local church, let us answer some common questions:

Can a person sexually attracted to their same sex follow Christ? Of course; can a glutton, a drug addict, a self-righteous legalist follow Christ? Can a person sexually attracted to the opposite sex follow Christ? Yes, the Gospel of God's grace is far reaching. Once the relationship with the Savior is established Jesus does what He does best. Along with the love of the Father and the work of the Holy Spirit, they will bring each of us under conviction, and begin the wonderful divine dance of sanctification. This is why the Church can reiterate what Jesus stated, "everyone who thirsts, come!" (John 7:37)

Should the church accept people who are homosexual? Of course; just as any local fellowship should accept any other person who is seeking to know God, who desires to be a part of the church family, and is willing to submit their heart to the teachings of Scripture.

The struggle Christians have and rightly should have with this question applies to any *other* person within a local fellowship and begs the following questions:

Is this person flaunting their lifestyle of sin? Is this person sincerely seeking? Are they professing Christians journeying in sanctification? Or are they rebellious, boisterous, not submitted to the Word of God?

Local churches frequently have couples attend who are living together unmarried. How long should we allow them to be a part a local church before we confront them for adultery? How do the local pastors and shepherds handle men who are enslaved to pornography? These are all individual case by case situations and are not answerable with a "one-size-fits-all" policy. This is why the duty of the local church is to care for one another and implement the instructions throughout Scripture to encourage, exhort, teach, model, care for, counsel, and when needed, correct, those with whom we share in the grace of Christ in each local church.

Before coming to Christ my wife wrestled with the questions, "will I have to hate gays?" or even "will I have to throw away all my music?"

These are two different questions, yet, they speak to a stereotype which my wife had as preconceived notions about what Christianity looked like. Fortunately, a wise brother in the faith responded saying, "You may find it surprising how God begins to change your desires and what you find valuable." Although she did change her taste in lyrics, the styles of music are the same and she has only increased in loving people who are different than her.

So, yes, the church should accept anyone who knows they are broken and need fixed; red, yellow, black and white, they are precious in His sight.

Should I attend a church that openly endorses same-sex marriage? For theological reasons, no. There are too many hurdles one must jump in order to "approve" of same-sex marriage from a Scriptural standpoint.

- It's a suppression of the truth found within Scripture from Genesis to Revelation
- It's a suppression of the consistent teachings from all Jewish and Christian history
- It's a suppression of the truth revealed by God through nature itself

If same-sex marriage is allowable for this generation, Pastor and Author Kevin DeYoung from Lansing, Michigan asks, "How have all Christians at all times and in all places interpreted the Bible so wrongly for so long?" This rhetorical question is answered with the obvious - *they haven't*. The arrogance of man as clearly written by Paul 2,000 years ago, is manifest in "those proclaiming to be wise becoming fools." (Romans 1:22)

If a pastor preaches the gospel but openly embraces gay marriage, are they still a brother?

Yes, possibly; however, if Paul rebuked Peter publicly for doctrinal error, (Galatians 2), our fellow family members should likewise be corrected lest they reach a point of leading others astray and as Jesus warns, “If anyone causes one of these little ones--those who believe in me--to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.” (Matthew 18:6 NIV)

Concerning this question of gay marriage, this is different from the individual human condition of depravity, of which we all suffer from. Ultimately, accepting a fellow human who is not yet convicted of sexual sin is the job of the church and modeled by Jesus. The political agenda dealing with human rights regarding marriage is an entirely separate issue. Many will want to blend the two together but they must be separated. Focusing on human rights or marriage equality is to ignore the human condition – total depravity and separation from God.

However, because of current culture, it should be stated that gay marriage is:

1. a distortion of the natural order
2. a breakdown of the image of God

Western thinking (Europe and the Americas) has had a major shift over the past 300 or more years. With the removal of God as Creator and humanistic secularism on the rise, surprisingly, one does still observe adultery as violating a covenant between a man and a woman. This is because God has been removed as the center of the universe and “man” is taking His place. The more we elevate the notion of scientific achievement and replace our wisdom with the Creators, man becomes *god*. Therefore, adultery is viewed as sin against another human, and secular culture still recognizes the shame of this betrayal. However, homosexual behavior is fading as a sin in the eyes of the western thinker because God has been removed, therefore, homosexual sex is no longer a “crime” against the Holy Creator who graciously gave men a natural law.

Simply stated, our modern poets have painted these portraits:

- Mankind = the new god
 - Violating contracts between men is wrong
- God who created the natural order = superstitious and antiquated or oppressive thinking
 - Man gets to express themselves in any fashion because we are above the natural order

Harming, judging, and even today, disagreeing with another person, and denying that which “makes someone happy” is becoming increasingly punishable. Homosexual relations are not seen as a violation against a Divine Creator because the world has gone the way of replacing man as the Supreme Being therefore we no longer sin against God and we're only concerned with sinning against each other.

In Conclusion:

The church needs to openly repent for its approach with people dealing with same-sex attraction. Our mishandling of this particular sin and *elevating* it above other sexual sins has:

- demonized those who are homosexual, ostracizing them from the church
- categorized people as reprobate and have been slack to offer Gospel centered hope

Two lies must be addressed:

1. Festering within the gay community is the notion that Christians and Churches are gay-haters

This is not true. Not all churches that preach the truth of Scripture and *do not* support gay marriage are against homosexual people. These are separate issues. People are not the issues they support or oppose. Life is much more complex. Not supporting something does not mean necessarily that you are against the one who does.

2. Circulating within the church is the notion that everyone within the gay community is a God hater.

Many people within the gay community and those actively living in, or contemplating, a same-sex relationship are genuinely seeking a relationship with their Creator.

The gay community unfortunately does propagate a lie when they say all churches are unwelcoming and Christians have turned off many same-sex attracted persons by fear based reactions lacking Christ-centered love and grace.

The climax of this portion of Scripture is found by reading Romans 1:28 through 2:11.

We do not always have a choice in how total depravity will affect our hearts. Many of us deal with lustful sexual thoughts, many of us lie to one another, brag about our achievements, lust for power, money, and lack faith.

Paul states that humanity does have a witness and when they do not respond as the witness bears upon our consciences, that is when “they were filled with all manner of unrighteousness...” Homosexual behavior is one of the downward degradations manifest by suppressing truth, not the bottom of barrel.

The word for the person who justifies herself by her own merit and moral standards apart from Christ comes in Romans 2:1 - 11

You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. Now we know that God’s judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. So when you, a mere human being, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God’s judgment? Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?

But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. God “will repay each person according to what they have done.” To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. *There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For God does not show favoritism.* (NIV italics added)

True equality in life is found in recognition that each are lost and each are broken and marred by sin and each of us grope towards fullness in this life which is only found by grace, through faith, in Christ.