

Homosexuality and Creation, Romans 1:18-32**by Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn (First Presbyterian Church, Tacoma, WA) - September 3, 2006**

I begin this morning a short series on a subject of great public importance and controversy in our culture today, viz. the view we are to take of homosexuals and homosexuality. The issue, as you know, is almost constantly in the news both locally and nationally. In Tacoma a few years ago the anti-discrimination statute was changed to accommodate the new and increasingly popular view of homosexuality as a condition over which an individual has little or no control, fixed and immutable, and which, therefore, should be regarded as a feature of his or her life as natural as skin color and equally without moral implications. In our city, so the official thinking goes, a homosexual is as normal as anyone else and his lifestyle deserving of acceptance and respect. A recent effort to force this viewpoint on the state as a whole narrowly failed at the Supreme Court in a case argued in part by our own elder, Steve O'Ban.

Efforts to grant marriage and its rights and privileges to homosexuals have succeeded in some places and failed in others, but it would be hard to deny that momentum seems to be on the side of those arguing that homosexuality should be accepted as a perfectly normal way of life. This effort to normalize homosexuality, to accept it socially and legally as good and right, may be said to be the great social controversy of our present historical moment in the United States of America. It is without question, for those on one side of this issue, the most important movement of liberation in our time, comparable, they often say, to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. They rarely compare it to the abortion rights movement, though it is, in fact, much more like that later movement. "Gay rights" for these people means the acceptance of homosexuality as a natural condition and, therefore, as the basis of an entirely legitimate way of life, deserving not only of protection but even of promotion. And so in public schools, for example, textbooks, even for young children, are being re-written to express approval of homosexuality. Given the measure of acceptance of homosexuality in the elite culture and in the entertainment media and given the artless and very public identification of homosexuals as homosexuals nowadays, young people may be forgiven for thinking that homosexuality has been accepted for a long time and only issues of public policy have recently become controversial. The movement to normalize homosexuality is in fact, however, a storm that has just broken over American life.

When I was growing up the subject rarely came up, was virtually unmentioned in the media, hardly ever appeared and never in a really positive light in television and movies, and homosexuality was recognized in the culture generally as a personality disorder. In preparation for this series I consulted some standard manuals of Christian ethics, books written in the 30s, 50s, and 60s. Hardly a word was devoted to homosexuality, so little was it an issue, so universally in the culture was it regarded as a sad disorder of human life. The argument did not have to be made in those days, it did not occur to anyone to make the argument that there was something wrong with the homosexual. Everyone knew that!

From the beginning of our American republic down to the present day, a homosexual was very definitely a person who was not normal. It was generally agreed, even by homosexuals themselves, that there was something wrong with homosexuality, something unnatural. That was also the well-nigh universal view of the American medical and psychiatric professions. Homosexuality was officially listed as one of many

psychiatric illnesses. Homosexuals were judged to be ill and therapists hoped to cure them. [J. Satinover, *Homosexuality and the Politics of Truth*, 32] But all of that changed, dramatically and virtually overnight, in 1973. The American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its approved list of illnesses or psychiatric disorders, not because research had disproved that longstanding view of homosexuality – very little research had been done up to that time – but for social and political reasons.

Nowadays the world has very nearly accommodated itself to the normalization of homosexuality. As one scholar puts it, “Like the ancient pagan Sodomites pounding on the door of Lot’s house millennia ago, the modern gay movement is gathering at the doors of our churches, our academies, and our once traditionally ‘Christian’ culture, demanding entrance and full recognition.” [Peter Jones, “Androgyny: The Pagan Sexual Ideal,” *JETS* 43/3 (Sept 2000) 443]

The reasons for this are many and to enumerate them would take too much time. But surely it is obvious that the effort to normalize homosexuality is the continuation and, we might well think, the consummation of the sexual revolution that has swept over modern Western life in our time. It does not take a scholar to know that we would not be having this debate about the normalization of homosexuality in the United States today had the culture not, over the past forty years, thoroughly accommodated itself to the ethic of sexual freedom, of sex outside the bounds of marriage, of promiscuity, pornography, abortion, to an all-encompassing ethic of sexual license. The approval of homosexuality is simply the inevitable extension of that same kind of thinking about human sexuality. Here is sex even more completely, more perfectly if you will, detached from a divinely imposed and transcendent order for human life. Here is sex still more completely detached from God and his will, still more completely a matter of human self-expression and the pursuit of pleasure without regard to the purposes for which God made man male and female. Here is, at the last, sex without any regard whatsoever to procreation.

Homosexuality thrives in a world in which sex is understood and practiced without regard to a divine creation. And, of course, that sexual revolution, as we know, was itself at one and the same time a cause and a result of the deep secularization of Western life. As man lost his sense of being a creature made in God’s image, as God gave way to man, as man became the measure of all things and the immediate pleasures of his life became the purpose of his existence, truth, moral absolutes, a transcendent purpose for human life, and a meaning for life apart from personal preference were no longer defensible. Sexual desires being as strong as they are, it should have been a surprise to no one that, in this secular environment, sexual behavior was almost the first human behavior to be profoundly transformed. If man no longer has to answer to God, if he is no longer bound to the purposes for which the Almighty made him and gave him life, the first thing he would do, it seems, was to find sexual pleasure where he could not before. Secularism and the sexual revolution came together. Many secularists have not only admitted this but gladly acknowledged the fact. They think the great gift of secularism to be liberating humanity from what they see as sexual repression.

In any case, when it became no longer possible to say that anything was right or wrong, good or evil, useful or harmful because there was, without God, no longer a divine rule to which human life must submit, the first thing men chose to throw off was the confining limitations of Christian sexual ethics.

Everyone must be free to do what is right in his own eyes, especially sexually. Only the churlish who refuse to grant this liberty to others can now be regarded as immoral.

For example, a few weeks ago, on August 21st, the California State Assembly passed bill number 1437, a bill that would alter K-12 public education textbooks, instructional materials, and school-sponsored activities to refer positively to transsexuality, transvestitism, bisexuality, and homosexuality, including homosexual "marriage." In his opening remarks, the Assembly Speaker, Fabian Nunez, who proposed the bill, openly said the real purpose of the new law is to outlaw traditional perspectives on marriage and family in the state school system. "The way that you correct a wrong," Nunez said, not pulling any punches, "is by outlawing it." The bill passed with a healthy margin, in celebration of the "moral rightness" of all these different sexual expressions.

Lightning fast as these changes have taken place – in less than a generation – they spring up from soil made very fertile of these new viewpoints. So much so that it seems self-evident to many intelligent people that it is those who continue to maintain that homosexuality is a disorder, who continue to think it a violation of God's will, or even simply a violation of nature, who are more and more regarded in the elite culture – among American judges, university professors, school administrators, social workers, politicians, and the like – as the disordered, the abnormal and the ill. The turnabout is almost complete. A generation ago the homosexual was the disordered one; today the one who condemns homosexuality is the disordered one.

Hence this series. The unrelentingly ferocious attack on biblical morality touching homosexuality now underway in the press, the entertainment industry, government, and the American academy, makes it all the more imperative that Christians have an intelligent grasp of the Bible's teaching and a confidence that the world's fury is, when all is said and done, nothing more than the ancient rebellion of man against his Maker. Christians need to know how inevitably futile that rebellion is and will be, how harmful it must prove to unknown numbers of infinitely valuable human beings, how degrading it is to the matchless dignity of human life, but, as well, what hope the Bible offers to those who struggle with homosexual desires.

It has become all the more important for Christians to have a sophisticated understanding of the Bible's teaching about homosexuality because, predictably enough, there are now a number of so-called evangelical teachers – supposedly Bible-believing people – who are also calling for the normalization of homosexuality. It was only to be expected. The same hermeneutics, the same approach taken to biblical interpretation by the so-called evangelical feminists, according to which the Bible's emphasis on the distinction of genders was overcome, could be used just as easily to overcome the distinction between heterosexual and homosexual and now is being so used, often by the same people. Nothing was more predictable than that the embrace of feminism would lead eventually to the embrace of homosexuality. Two of the women who wrote early influential books purporting to be biblical defenses of feminism have since both identified themselves as lesbians (though they did not think themselves to be so until well after they became feminists) and have since abandoned altogether the convictions of biblical Christianity. Prominent leaders in recognizably evangelical churches have publicly argued for the acceptance of homosexuals as homosexuals – that is, as practicing their sexual lifestyles – in the

Christian church. Once again, as Dr. Schaeffer used to say: “Tell me what the world is saying and I’ll tell you what the church will be saying in ten or twenty years.”

Christian preaching has often lost its edge, its power, and its scandal. In some periods of church history, at least in many quarters of the church, the preaching of God’s Word, God’s truth, was overwhelmed by politeness, timidity, blandness, and an almost complete unwillingness to offend. There was a spiritual cowardice, a fear of the consequences of confronting the culture. Preaching of that kind is emptied of all its usefulness and spiritual effect. Take this opening of sermon from a St. Andrews University professor when Moderatism was at its height in early 19th century Scotland. The text of the sermon was “Enoch walked with God.”

“Walking, – my brethren, – is – that – mode – of – progression – by which – a – man – by – alternately – advancing – first – one – foot – and then – the – other, – gradually – proceeds – along – the – road.”
[The St. Andrews Seven, 8]

There is too much of this preaching in even evangelical pulpits today. It has become a declaration of sentiments so bland, so uncontroversial, as to provoke no offense even in a culture at war with the truth of God. There has been too little direct confrontation of the society such as we always find in the preaching contained in Holy Scripture and in the history of faithful Christian preaching. When the world is in open rebellion against God its maker, when eternal life and eternal death hang in the balance, and when the truth about God and man is being openly defied, it is the forceful proclamation of God’s Word that is needed, that and nothing else. That proclamation, that declaration must offend because God demands submission and men are by nature rebels. But the truth that offends is also the truth that sets men free and makes them alive and brings them back to God.

I have felt that it is high time for me to address this issue because of its importance in our culture at this moment. But I am also ready to preach on homosexuality precisely because it exposes fundamental issues of faith and life. Through an approach to this issue as an issue of contemporary human life and belief we come very quickly to the central affirmations of our Christian faith and to the central issues of human life. There is nothing that I will say about homosexuality and homosexuals that is not immediately relevant to every human being and to you and to me. The Bible makes this very clear. The judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah is, for example, in the Bible, made an image of the judgment of the entire world – homosexual or not. And, as we will see in Romans 1, in the text we read, the sin of homosexuals is of a piece with the sin of all mankind, the sin that if not overcome by the redemption of Christ must cause human beings to be swept away by God’s holy wrath.

And it is to the Bible that we turn. You will hear nowadays a great deal about scientific research that purports to prove this or that about homosexuality. I will not go into all of that. There has been a lot of nonsense trumpeted in the press, to be sure. There is no homosexual gene. Neither genes nor other biological factors are decisive in causing people to have same-sex attractions. That is clear enough. People in favor of the normalization of homosexuality will often describe the condition as something akin to left-handedness, a genetic trait over which the left-handed person had no control whatsoever. But, of course, were homosexuality such a trait, it would very likely have been selected out long ago,

because homosexual people – already a tiny minority of the population – do not reproduce, do not hand on their genetic inheritance nearly as much as heterosexual people do. Studies of identical twins, for example, have disproved the claim that homosexuality is simply a genetic inheritance. The most that can be said is that certain factors may slightly increase a person’s tendency to become attracted to people of the other sex should other psychological and sociological factors be present. All of that is pretty clear and most scientists in the related disciplines will admit that much. The argument is not really about genetics or biology. The appeal to genetics is a useful political ploy, to which the media happily acquiesce, but little more. The argument is about morality, about meaning, and about the nature of human beings. For such things the world has nowhere certain to turn; but we Christians turn and must turn to the Word of God that stands forever.

What we can know for sure about homosexuality we find in the pages of Holy Scripture. There we learn whether it is good or bad, there we learn whether practicing homosexuals can repudiate their lifestyle and happily and fruitfully live a normal heterosexual life and there we learn what people who have homosexual tendencies ought to do in order to live in a manner pleasing to God. I am going to organize our consideration of the Bible’s material on this subject in a three-fold division: homosexuality and creation, homosexuality and redemption, and homosexuality and holiness. It is according to that division that I read our text this morning. It is rich text full of important truth, but I want simply to draw your attention to Paul’s affirmation that homosexuality – which he explicitly defines as a set of desires and a set of practices – is an affront to divine creation. It is this that leads the great apostle to the Gentiles to describe homosexuality as a perversion, as he does in vv. 26 and 27. And he roots that complex of desires and practices that we call homosexuality in the rebellion of mankind against its creator, in man’s worship of himself instead of the God who made him. He describes sexual license and homosexuality as an extreme form of that license as direct consequences of men worshiping the creature instead of the creator as we read in vv. 24-27. Homosexuality, in other words, as he says in vv. 26 and 27, is unnatural, that is, it is contrary to nature as God created it; it violates and betrays the purpose of man and woman as God made them. As one of the finest commentators on Romans explains, when Paul speaks of “natural” and “unnatural” relations he is referring to “the intention of the Creator.” [Cranfield, i, 125] He goes on: “It denotes that order which is manifest in God’s creation and which men have no excuse for failing to recognize and respect...” [126] Indeed, this entire section is saturated with the language and the thought of Genesis 1:20-26, the account of the creation of man and woman.

In Paul’s magnificent and profoundly important description of human life in rebellion against God, he describes human life as first and foremost a defiant rebellion against creatureliness. The entire history of human life in this world can be seen as man’s attempt to erase the creator/creature distinction. And if many men would deny that they were denying God or his existence or even his creation, Paul says that in their living they are denying it de facto. As C.S. Lewis describes the situation that Paul is here describing, “[Human beings] wanted, as we say, to ‘call their souls their own.’ But that meant to live a lie, for our souls are not, in fact, our own. They wanted some corner in the universe of which they could say to God, ‘This is our business, not yours.’ But there is no such corner.” [The Problem of Pain, 80] And that is Paul’s point as well. God has not let mankind succeed in its rebellion against him. His wrath has long lain and lies today heavy upon the rebellious earth. Sin has been punished, as it often is, with more

sin, and sin becomes ever more degrading, ever more dehumanizing, and takes men and women ever further from God the source of their life and their only hope of life to come. This is the point of the final section, vv. 28-32. One does not find higher life by rejecting one's nature as a creature made in the image of God. Rather one is cut loose to discover what the world is like when it has been emptied of God, of his law, and of the purpose for which we were made. What is left but rivalry, dissatisfaction, competition, and every form of hate, as each individual seeks what he can from a world ruled by meaningless forces?

It is interesting that in the Bible homosexuality is sometimes treated as one among many sins. In Paul's catalog of sins for which God's judgment and wrath is reserved, such as we are given in 1 Cor. 6:9-10, homosexual acts are listed together with all other forms of sexual immorality – promiscuity and adultery, for example – and with theft, drunkenness, and slander. Indeed, the Lord Jesus makes a point of saying that there are worse sins than homosexuality. On more than one occasion he said that it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment – cities you remember that were notorious for their homosexual perversion – than for the towns of Galilee that witnessed the coming of the Messiah, saw him perform miracles, and yet did not believe in him. [Matt. 10:14-15; 11:22-24]

It is very important for Christians to remember this. Homosexual sin is, first and foremost, sin, one of many forms of rebellion against God and the rejection of the Creator's will for human life. Homosexuality is a form of sexual sin, and we are all sinners and it is very doubtful if any of us is not a sexual sinner, sinful in the way we think and act under the influence of sexual desire. If we do not sin in precisely the same way as the homosexual sins, we sin in other ways equally damning – including other ways of sexual sin – more often than we know and more egregiously than we ever care to admit. That is very clear in Paul and in the rest of the Bible. The homosexual is no different from any other sinner and from any other sexual sinner: he is a rebel who needs to be reconciled to God his Maker. He is a sinner who needs forgiveness in Jesus Christ. And, as we will point out next week, the Bible's greatest word about homosexuality is that it is a sin that can be and often has been utterly forgiven and swept away by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. The homosexual need have no less hope than anyone else of eternal life if only he or she will come to Christ for forgiveness and for new life.

But it is also true that Paul seems here to regard homosexuality as a terminal form of sin, a sin that is the riper fruit of previous sin, as sin in its maturity and full development, sin that has gone beyond the normal course of human sin. Paul certainly seems to be giving an anatomy of sin's development and its course in human life in these verses. One thing leads to another and sin worsens as it goes. The implication very clearly in vv. 26 and 27 is that however offensive, however repellent is fornication and adultery, homosexuality is still more so, more degenerate, more perverse. And this is everywhere the Bible's view. In Genesis' account of Sodom and Gomorrah and in Judges' account of the men of Gibeah homosexual practice is regarded as worse than other forms of sexual sin. In Leviticus 18 homosexuality is listed together with sins of incest and bestiality, especially awful sexual sins. As you may know, efforts have been made to get round the impression of this material – to argue that only homosexual abuse is condemned or only uncommitted homosexual sex or homosexual sex that does not proceed from a homosexual orientation – but these are desperate and utterly unconvincing attempts and founder on

the plain words of the Bible. What the Bible condemns and consistently condemns as especially egregious sexual sin is sex with the same sex -- the desire for it and the practice of it. It is unnatural.

At the social level this is obvious enough. Homosexuality as a public lifestyle has developed only after our society's widespread acceptance of other sexual sins: promiscuity, pornography, abortion and the like. But at the personal level it can also be seen. We are not surprised to read, for example, that Hugh Hefner, who made a life of seducing and using young women, and who has publicly gloried in his life of endless promiscuity, now finds that even with young women he must resort to homosexual pornography. Sated on heterosexual promiscuity, this now eighty-year-old man must move to something still further removed from his nature to gratify his self-expression as a rebel against God and to satisfy his lust for pleasure. Or, we might consider the fact that homosexual orientation is often the result of abusive, troubled, or confused relationships on the part of children with his or her parents or peers. Such a life, in other words, is regularly the fruit of other ways in which lives have gone wrong.

I don't mean to suggest that Paul means that sexually depraved societies will eventually become entirely homosexual – the prevalence of homosexuality in societies generally seems quite stable in fact – only that there is that about the sin in itself that renders it still further from the ideal of the creator than other forms of sexual sin. There is something more, something additional that is wrong with it. It represents, the sin in itself, a full-flowering of sin and rebellion against God. It is not simply that sexual activity is not pure and chaste, but now is in fact unnatural. It is not enough that men and women are having sex who should not; in this case men are not having sex with women at all, nor women with men. It is as if we have moved beyond men not wanting to do what God commands; now they do not even want to be what God has made them to be. Listen carefully; I am not saying that such a progression has taken place in any particular homosexual's life. Not at all. Very often people who struggle against homosexuality do so in large part because they have been sinned against, not because they themselves have sinned and been punished with this greater sin. What I am saying is that the sin in itself and as a feature of society is sin "down the road," sin that has gone beyond. That the Bible says very clearly. Homosexuality was a Canaanite sin, the sin of people who had lost their moral compass entirely; the sin of people who sacrificed their own children to idols, as we do in our abortion practicing age.

Now, as is well known and can be easily demonstrated, Paul wrote these words to Christians who lived in a culture that, very much like ours, was decidedly tolerant of homosexual activity and, as today, heard voices trumpeting its virtue, even its superiority to heterosexual sex. But he also speaks here as if his condemnation of homosexuality – in itself and in all its forms – were perfectly uncontroversial in the church. The reason for this is precisely his argument that God created men and women for each other sexually and that homosexuality is and must be, in the nature of the case, a betrayal of the Creator's intention and of his goodness and wisdom in making man male and female. The fundamental issue here and in every other part of our lives is this: are we creatures of a Creator? Have we been made with a purpose? Are our lives our own or do we belong to the One who made us? Is our way of life ours to choose or must we do the will of our Maker? Is the Jesus merely our friend or is he the Lord of the cosmos to whom all human beings are subject?

All of man's rebellion against God, Paul here says, takes the form of a denial of God as the creator of heaven and earth and of every human being. It is utterly predictable that in an age that denies creation and our creation – the age of Darwin and evolution – we should hear the very practices that amount to a repudiation of God the creator being recommended and celebrated. We kill babies in the womb for one reason and one only: we do not believe that they are creatures of the living God who, as their creator, will hold accountable those who kill people whom he has made. We have sex outside of marriage for one reason and one reason only: we do not believe that God made sex for very specific purpose and appointed marriage as the only proper sphere of sexual intimacy. We have sex outside of marriage because we do not believe that God has established an order for human life and that those who violate that order are defying his will.

Nothing should be less surprising than that in a day such as ours, a day when the very idea of God's creation of heaven and earth and of men and women is now so far removed from the mind, man exults in the doing of what the Creator forbids, that man celebrates the violation of his nature. It is the most convincing way to declare that his nature belongs to himself alone and does not come from God. It is the perfect act of rebellion. That is what homosexuality is: a protest against the very idea that a man has a creator, a creator with a will, a plan, and a purpose for human life, and a law that governs that life. Homosexuality is the denial of God the Creator. But God is the Creator and that is why homosexuality is a scourge for those who practice it and for the society that endorses it. Man can deny his Creator; he cannot escape him. Man can deny his nature; he cannot escape it. Man can rebel but he cannot prevail. To proclaim God the Creator is to give men the only hope there is: the way back to what is real.