

University of Mary Washington

Eagle Scholar

Student Research Submissions

Spring 5-6-2023

Redefining Unnatural: A Modern Understanding of Paul's Homophobia

Emma Bradley

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.umw.edu/student_research



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), and the [Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bradley, Emma, "Redefining Unnatural: A Modern Understanding of Paul's Homophobia" (2023). *Student Research Submissions*. 509.

https://scholar.umw.edu/student_research/509

This Honors Project is brought to you for free and open access by Eagle Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Research Submissions by an authorized administrator of Eagle Scholar. For more information, please contact archives@umw.edu.

Emma Bradley

RELG 401: Thesis

Dr. Barry

April 4, 2023

Redefining Unnatural: A Modern Understanding of Paul's Homophobia

Abstract

This paper will examine the change in the meaning of the word “unnatural” in Romans 1:26-27, and establish both an idea of what the Apostle Paul intended and a definition for how the word is used in modernity. There are five sections, each one building off of the next. The first section is titled “Background.” The background will introduce the reader to who Paul is, and why his writing is important. It will also explain the meaning of the words exegetical, and eisegetical before explaining why this paper is needed. The next section is titled “Analysis of the Text” and will provide an in depth exegetical reading of Romans 1:26-27 while also examining 1 Corinthians 5 and 7 in order to better understand Romans. Section three is “Scholar's Reading of the Text” and will look at how four different scholars have defined “unnatural” through exegetical readings. The four scholars are: James Miller, David Murphy, Jeramy Townsley, and Bernadette Brooten. Using all four, a comprehensive idea of Paul's intent will be suggested. The fourth section is titled “Understanding and Usage in Antiquity” and is a examination of Jerome's letter to Demetrius and how Jerome uses Paul's argument to support his own beliefs. The next section is “Modern Definition and Understanding” and forms a definition using the texts from the Roman Catholic Church and various influential Fundamentalists. Finally, a conclusion will be provided in which Paul's intent is reiterated and a definition is set along with analysis about how the text must be discussed in the future.

Background

The Apostle Paul wrote many letters covering a wide range of issues, which have been used to support arguments throughout history. He was originally known as a Pharisee named Saul who persecuted Jewish people who believed in Jesus, until he has a vision and began trying to follow Jesus Christ's teachings.¹ Widely known as the founder of Christianity, Paul has been an influential person throughout history and his texts are still cited today. Thirteen books in the Christian New Testament are attributed to him, most of them the letters he wrote. His letters were often sent to advise a group of early Christians on how to act. Many of his letters refer to sex and sexuality, often condemning the letter's recipient for perceived sexual wrongs. One of the main issues found is that the letters are one sided, therefore the full conversation cannot be seen by scholars, and they must fill in the blanks through assumptions. Only Paul's letters and what he claims to be citing are available, leading to a lack of sources to support what is written. Often, this has been done with an eisegetical approach by people who wish to support their arguments using Paul's letters. Eisegetical refers to the projection of personal beliefs onto the source. Eisegetical readings have been an issue because they lead to misuse of Romans 1:26-27 to justify bigotry. Romans 1:26-27 states: "For this reason God gave them over to dishonorable passions. Their females exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural,²⁷ and in the same way also the males, giving up natural intercourse with females, were consumed with their passionate desires for one another. Males committed shameless acts with males and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error."² This letter is one of the only times Paul mentions female sexuality. For many years this passage has been used to justify homophobia, and people have

¹ Sanders, E. "St. Paul the Apostle." Encyclopedia Britannica, January 5, 2023.
<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Paul-the-Apostle>.

² Romans 1:26-27 (New Revised Standard Version)

defined “unnatural” to support their beliefs. Numerous scholars have offered definitions, which can lead to confusion when discussing the text. A wide variety of definitions means that multiple people may say they agree with Paul, while they believe different things. For example, if someone says they agree with Paul and they believe homosexuality is bad, and someone who believes all sex is wrong also says they agree with Paul there is a disconnect in the conversation. While it is impossible to know what was truly intended by Paul, it is important to understand what was originally intended by using an exegetical approach to negate the confusion around unnatural. Exegetical means to derive from the text. While scholars must agree upon what Paul meant, Religion is fluid and changes over time, as does the meaning of the text, so while it is important to define what Paul meant, there should be a definition that corresponds with current beliefs to continue the discussion in modernity. Scholars need to agree what Paul meant in Romans 1:26-27 and there needs to be a comprehensive, agreed-upon definition about the meaning of “unnatural” in modernity, before any discussion about the text can continue. This paper will begin by defining what Paul meant in Romans 1:26-27, before moving into the examination of modern opinions of the text to create a modern definition. The definition will be based on how public figures use the text to support their beliefs, and what has been published by those people.

Analysis of the Text

1 Corinthians was written before Romans and, therefore, can be used to assume what was meant by unnatural. This is also a letter, and in both cases, scholars do not have the letter that he is responding to and must go off educated assumptions about the contents. The lack of contemporary discourse lends favor to the text being able to support any narrative because there is no concrete idea of what the situation actually was. Because of this it is hard to do an exegesis

reading of the text as there are no documents to base what is written in “response” to the letter. It is helpful that he often references the same points in his letters because that allows for some comparison to be made.

1 Corinthians 7 discusses in detail marriage and sex and is clear about Paul’s stance on both. This helps to better understand Romans. Using 1 Corinthians 7 it can be assumed that part of “unnatural” refers to sex outside of marriage. Paul takes a clear stance that “it is good for a man not to touch a woman.”³ The context of this passage implies that this touch is sexual in nature because it is referring to when sex is considered acceptable. He goes on to say, “but because of cases of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.”⁴ Instead of “unnatural” the term “sexual immorality” is used and once again the definition of that could mean anything. Because this passage is titled “Directions concerning marriage”⁵ it can be assumed that the sexual immorality refers to any sex outside of the confines of what is now considered a heterosexual marriage. The term “unnatural” is used in much the same way as “sexual immorality” and because “sexual immorality” is defined in a more succinct manner, a definition of “unnatural” could be based off of that definition. Paul’s opinions on sex do not seem to change throughout his letters, so how he defines immoral sex, provides insight into what might have been meant by “unnatural.”

1 Corinthians 7 also adds to the idea that the “unnatural” is any sex. Paul takes an anti-sex stance, where he praises any who do not engage in sexual acts. He views marriage as a last resort, and that it should only be done if people lack self-control. He writes “to the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain unmarried as I am. But if they are not

³ 1 Corinthians 7:1 (New Revised Standard Version)

⁴ 1 Corinthians 7:2 (New Revised Standard Version)

⁵ 1 Corinthians 7 (New Revised Standard Version)

practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.”⁶ In this Paul is acknowledging that humans want to have sex, but he says it should only be done if there is commitment. Therefore, he is acknowledging that sex is a natural urge, even if he views it as a sin. He then continues to say that celibacy and virginity should be the goal but there should be no shame in marriage. By saying this he is implying that there should be shame in non-marital sex. This can expand the meaning of unnatural as something that the men and women being referred to in Romans should be ashamed of. That means that unnatural through the lens of 1 Corinthians 7 refers to sex outside of marriage and is something people should feel shame about if they participate in it. The idea of shame is also referenced in Romans 1:27 when he says, “Males committed shameless acts with males and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.”⁷ This verse reinforces the idea that sex is shameful and it defines unnatural sex as sex without shame.

Prior to 1 Corinthians 7, 1 Corinthians 5 provides some discussion from Paul about sex. This chapter and Romans 1 have many commonalities. In both he begins by attacking the people he is writing to for “immorality.”⁸ He says that not only are they immoral, but engaging with people who are acting immorally is also wrong. He says that if they continue to include “immoral” people then they are also acting immorally. This contradicts chapter 7 where he discusses staying with married partners regardless of their morality. He says that by being with a moral person the spouse is saved. This complicates what unnatural means further because if it is immoral to be with other immoral people then it would also be unnatural to be around unnatural people. He implies that being married negates the immorality and, therefore, nothing done within

⁶ 1 Corinthians 7:8-9 (New Revised Standard Version)

⁷ Romans 1:27 (NRSV)

⁸ 1 Corinthians 5 (New Revised Standard Version)

the confines of a heteronormative marriage would be considered unnatural. Yet at the same time he is also arguing that sex should be for procreation not pleasure. Paul seems sure that marriage is better than no marriage, yet when it comes to what is done within the confines of a heterosexual marriage he seems uncertain. What he meant that even if both parties are no longer immoral, they can act in unnatural ways. 1 Corinthians offers insight into what Paul believed at the time and, therefore, can be used to make assumptions about the true meaning of Romans 1:26-27.

Even without 1 Corinthians, some definitions can be drawn from Romans alone. The first part to look at is how he references women and their sexual practices. This is important as often women were overlooked, especially in terms of sexuality. In many Christian sects' female virginity is viewed as an ideal. This comes from the existence of characters such as the "Virgin Mary" whose popularity is partly due to her virginity. Romans and 1 Corinthians exacerbates this idea of virginity, but Paul takes it further to include male virginity. Paul tends to fixate on the idea that sex is wrong and evil, regardless of gender. He does not try to uphold the gendered stereotype of only men should be allowed to have sex, which is prevalent in society today. An exegetical reading of his letters proves that, instead of shaming just women, Paul believes that no one should engage in sexual acts. He continues with his belief that if they cannot control their urges then they should only engage within the confines of a heteronormative marriage.

The concept of marrying instead of only acting on urges is where "unnatural" varies because he clearly states in Corinthians that if people's passions are too strong than they should marry, but in Romans he is facing the issue of people's passions being too strong for those of the same sex. Therefore, he deems them unnatural instead of saying immoral. This lends itself to the idea that it is not a choice to have those feelings, but that the feelings themselves are wrong. This

is in line with many Jewish beliefs that homosexual thoughts are not the problem unless they are acted upon. It is important to note that Paul was Jewish before he started what is now considered Christianity. It is likely that he was influenced by Jewish doctrines and scholars. He likely would have been influenced by the beliefs of Jewish scholars and their perception of sex. This is explained by David Wheeler-Reed in *Regulating Sex in the Roman Empire* where he discusses the Jewish argument about procreation.⁹ The Jewish argument aligns with Paul, specifically the beliefs of Philo, a Jewish philosopher. Wheeler-Reed describes Philo's view as "Uncontrolled desire means sexual pleasure, which Philo sees as the greatest source of individual and social corruption."¹⁰ Paul, similarly, condemns people for not having control by praising those who do not engage. In Romans 1:26-27 he says that "their females exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural," implying that the action itself is "unnatural" rather than the feelings.¹¹ This is again in line with some Jewish beliefs, as the feelings they felt for each other are not forbidden, but rather the actions. However, he does refer to the feelings as "dishonorable passions," which implies that the feelings themselves are also wrong. But the feelings are only wrong if one does not make the "honorable" choice of repenting and ignoring those feelings.

The way Paul phrases "unnatural" sex for women versus men indicates that he is biased against women and in support of gender roles. The phrasing in Romans 1:26 is "their females exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural," he continues saying "...and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women were consumed with passion for one another."¹² Further evidencing that not only is Paul referring to homosexuality but gender

⁹ David Wheeler-Reed, "Judaism," in *Regulating Sex in the Roman Empire: Ideology, the Bible, and the Early Christians* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), [Page 39-62].

¹⁰ Wheeler-Reed, "Judaism," [Page 45].

¹¹ Romans 1:26 (NRSV)

¹² Romans 1:27 (NRSV)

dynamics. When referring to the women he says “exchanged” implying that it was a conscious decision. However, he provides the men with the excuse of being consumed with passion. Through this phrasing, Paul is implying that women sin willingly and choose to have a sexual appetite whereas men have less control over themselves. This is commonly seen today where women are expected to not have sex whereas men are excused because they do not have control over their desires. For example, purity culture punishes women for having sex while excusing men because of their gender. This further goes into modesty and how women are accused of “causing men to stumble” because of what they are wearing, indicating that the man cannot control himself and it is the responsibility of a woman to not tempt him. According to Wheeler-Reed Paul’s blaming of women is deeply rooted in gender roles of the time and the reasoning for those roles. He says, “the reason Jewish literature of this period suggests that the husband rules over his wife is that, like many Greco-Roman authors, Jewish authors thought women were deceitful, with no control over their passions.”¹³ He also agrees that women belong to men through his usage of the possessive “their.” Paul argues that the women “exchange” natural sex for unnatural meaning they were simultaneously making a choice and giving into their passions which they could not control. Paul does go against the Jewish authors by saying that no one should have sex, instead of just condemning women, but he still tries to make excuses for the men. This is still seen today and is why scholars continue to study Paul.

Scholar’s Reading of the Text

“Unnatural” is a broad term, and Paul’s meaning is equally broad. Reading Romans 1:26-27 on the surface, it seems apparent that it is referring to same sex relationships and what is called today sexuality. And this is true, but it is not the only definition that would fit, but rather

¹³ Wheeler-Reed, “Judaism,” [Page 56].

one part. It is unlikely that any definition posed for Paul's intention would be agreed upon unanimously but one that the majority would agree with would suffice to continue conversation about Paul. Multiple scholars have offered different definitions of what Paul meant and by combining these, Paul's meaning can be understood.

The above analysis is naturally affected by modern biases and therefore understanding what scholars have said is needed to avoid personal bias. By comparing a personal exegesis reading to those of other scholars, the commonalities can be taken and used to find a definition, which is not swayed by human biases. Four scholars will be used to determine what Paul intended and how scholars should further the conversation. The four scholars will be: James Miller, David Murphy, Jeramy Townsley, and Bernadette Brooten. All four have written articles which focus on Romans 1 and highlight the importance of understanding the original intention of the text.

James Miller discusses possible meanings of "unnatural" in *The Practices of Romans 1:26: Homosexual or Heterosexual?*¹⁴ His thesis clearly states, "there is little reason for understanding verse 26 as describing homosexual activity, and good reason for understanding it as a description of unnatural heterosexual intercourse."¹⁵ His argument stems from homosexuality being a modern word and concept, he then says that because it was not a specific topic mentioned that people should not attribute it to the text. Miller argues that scholars should not investigate the meaning of Paul. But in order to have a conversation about the text from a scholarly lens it is important to use an exegetical reading, and figure out the original intention of the passage. Miller also says that it is not about female homosexuality, which it is true that

¹⁴ James E. Miller, "The Practices of Romans 1:26: Homosexual or Heterosexual?" *Novum Testamentum* 37, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1561233>

¹⁵ Miller, "The Practices," [Page 1].

female homosexuality is not explicitly mentioned, but Paul says “and in the same way,”¹⁶ which connects both the unnatural sex of females and the unnatural sex of males. Miller focuses on trying to steer the understanding of Paul’s meaning away from homosexuality but also defines “unnatural” as non-procreative sex. The word is broad and as such Paul’s intention encapsulates many different meanings. Homosexual sex is non-procreative so, while the text is not only referring to homosexuality, it is only a smaller part of the whole.

Miller’s argument is continued by David Murphy in *More Evidence Pertaining to “Their Females” in Romans 1:26* where he argues that Paul is not arguing against homosexuality for women.¹⁷ Like Miller, Murphy also believes that “unnatural” sex for women is referring to non-procreative sex with men. His focus is on different types of non-procreative sex such as anal or oral sex (AO as abbreviated by Murphy).¹⁸ Murphy focuses his argument on different ancient texts which do not refer directly to female homosexuality, but rather females engaging in non-procreative sex with males. He argues that those sources did not mention female homosexuality, and therefore, Paul would not have thought to add them either. Because it was not an apparent widespread topic, he believes it is unlikely that Paul would have been responding to a letter specifically about female homosexuality. Like Miller, Murphy also ignores “likewise” in Romans which combines the two subjects. Both Miller and Murphy argue that “unnatural” is not about homosexuality but contradict their arguments by claiming it is referring to non-procreative sex. From both of their analysis one part of Paul’s intent can be derived: unnatural refers to non-procreative sex. Due to the lack of evidence through an exegetical reading to support it only referring to heterosexuality, it can be understood that the word refers to more than just

¹⁶ Romans 1:27 (NRSV)

¹⁷ David J. Murphy, "More Evidence Pertaining to 'Their Females' in Romans 1:26," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.15699/jbl.1381.2019.522595>.

¹⁸ Murphy, "More Evidence," [Page 221].

heterosexual sex, even if it is not explicitly defined. Non-procreative sex includes homosexual sex, but also includes anal and oral sex because none lead to the creation of babies. Any other sex which does not lead to the creation of babies or have the possibility to create babies would fall under this part of Paul's meaning, as it is a broad term. The second part that needs to be added is that unnatural also refers to sex outside of a marriage between a man and a woman. Putting those together the way Paul meant for unnatural to be understood is: any sex that is non-procreative, and outside of a heterosexual marriage.

Jeremy Townsley's definition depicts how broad the definition could be, and may be, in *Paul, the Goddess Religions, and Queer Sects: Romans 1:23-28*.¹⁹ In his article Townsley examines Romans 1 further and uses the context of the text to support his view. He does agree with Miller and Murphy about the meaning not necessarily being about homosexuality. He then expands on what it could mean past non-procreative sex. The main argument is that "unnatural" could be referring to idol worship. Much of his argument is based on other scholars, including Bernadette Brooten, where he agrees that unnatural could refer to the switching of gender roles. However, he views this as too broad of a definition. He instead switches to focus on Paul potentially being influenced by "Goddess religions." Paul would have seen many of these religions during his time as a missionary. These Goddesses were usually sex positive who encouraged women to embrace their sexuality. By demonizing sex, specifically women having sex, Paul could demonize these "Goddess religions." The Goddesses would not be following traditional gender roles and therefore would threaten Paul's ideal of a heteronormative anti-sex world. The exegetical reading of this would be that "unnatural" refers to gender roles because there is no evidence that Paul was using his targeting of female sexuality to target idol worship.

¹⁹ Jeremy Townsley, "Paul, the Goddess Religions, and Queer Sects: Romans 1:23-28," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.15699/jbl.1381.2019.522595>.

The idea of idol worship is seen when examining modern people who cite the text, especially Fundamentalist preachers. Townsley argues that Romans is about idol worship, not sex.

However, he agrees that sex is included in what Paul meant by idol worship.

Bernadette Brooten focused primarily on Romans being about following gender roles. In *Love Between Women*²⁰ Brooten says, "Paul condemns sexual relations between women as 'unnatural' because he share the widely held cultural view that women are passive by nature and therefore should remain passive in sexual relations."²¹ Brooten continues to look into Romans 1:18-32 in depth, and at the historical context of the text. She argues that while the passage does refer to non-procreative sex, it is less about sex and more about the dynamics within sex. When explaining the dynamics she refers to sexual relations between women saying, "according to this literature, a woman cannot naturally assume the active role, thus rendering natural sexual relations between women impossible."²² She is agreeing that the text refers to homosexuality, even if that is just one part.

Using both Townsley and Brooten the historical, exegetical understanding of Paul can be added to include gender roles. It is important to take what is in common between all the scholars to try and create the greatest amount of agreement so that a productive discussion about the use of the word in modernity can be achieved in academia. Although full overlap is impossible, trying to include something from each text in the definition is the best way to create a comprehensive understanding that is informed from an exegetical, scholarly reading of Romans 1:26-27. Miller and Murphy referred to sex that is non-procreative and outside of a heterosexual marriage. Adding Townsley and Brooten's articles would mean including sex which goes against

²⁰ Bernadette J. Brooten, "Romans 1:18-32: A Commentary," in *Love Between Women*, by Bernadette J. Brooten (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, n.d.)

²¹ Brooten, "Romans 1:18-32," [Page 216].

²² Brooten, "Romans 1:18-32," [Page 216].

gender roles into the to the understanding of the intent. With all of this an understanding of Paul's intent in this passage can be narrowed down to: in Romans 1:26-27, "unnatural" refers to any sex which is non-procreative, outside of marriage, and goes against gender roles. The understanding reached touches on the three most overlapped parts from each scholar. It may seem to be vague, but Romans is also vague in this section. An understanding of Romans must be built around what Paul has written outside of Romans. Above is a comprehensive definition that reflects Paul's intent and the thoughts of scholars.

Understanding and Usage in Antiquity

Words change overtime, and this has happened with Paul's intentions. In Jerome's *Letter 14* to Demetrias, Jerome expands on Paul's definition and exemplifies how the words change depending on who is interpreting them.²³ Jerome's letter primarily relies on Paul's letters to the Corinthians, but many of his arguments are in line with Romans 1:26. Jerome takes Paul's definition and twists it away from sex, and argues that women should not look at, talk to, or associate with men. He simultaneously blames women and claims they are passive, secondary characters. Jerome repeatedly refers to Demetrias as a virgin, indicating that to him her value lies in her chastity. Paul encourages chastity and praises women who remain virgins, and Jerome continues that tradition. They also were likely influenced by the same teachings, which explains why their arguments are so similar. Paul strongly opposed sex, but relented that it was ok, in a heterosexual, marriage which upholds gender roles with the intent of procreation. Jerome tells Demetrius that she should never have sex, or get married. He says, "Stay away from the playfulness of girls who adorn their heads... so that under the guise of virginity they may be ruined [appearing to be] for sale."²⁴ According to Jerome, women who dress nicely are doing so

²³ Jerome to Demetrias, "A Letter from Jerome," n.d., <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/1282.html>.

²⁴ Jerome to Demetrias, "A Letter."

to be appealing to men. Jerome believes that Demetrius should avoid any want of sex and therefore should not dress in a way that would be attractive. Essentially, he is saying that if she is dressed nicely then she is asking to be treated as an object of desire by men. This is inline with Romans 1 because it reemphasizes the notion that women are seducing the men. By being seduced, men would become passive as it puts women in a position of power. By saying this is wrong, Jerome reinforces how “unnatural” refers to anything against gender roles.

Although Jerome bases his argument in what Paul has said, he does expand it to fit his perception. Jerome says, “be subject to your Mather and grandmother, and, unless in their company, do not look upon men – especially young men. Do not know any man whom they do not know.”²⁵ He takes Paul’s idea of chastity being important to the extreme by including not only sex or desire, but simple human interaction to the growing list of rules he is setting for Demetrius. Similar to Paul, Jerome is still blaming Demetrius and putting the responsibility on her to avoid men, while saying she is a passive character and that is why she can not be alone with a man who is an active character. This contradiction appears many times in both Paul’s writings and Jerome’s. Paul does this by saying “their women,” implying that they belong to a group before blaming the women for engaging in “unnatural” intercourse. This remains a common theme even as Jerome changes the definition to refer to any interaction between men and women, not just sexual interaction. Like Paul, Jerome concedes that, “they must be told openly either to marry if they cannot contain themselves, or to contain themselves if they do not wish to marry.”²⁶ However, unlike Paul, Jerome is giving an ultimatum where the woman is the only one to blame. He also says that this is how other women should act but still enforces that Demetrius should not want sex. Furthermore, he is saying that it is unnatural for a woman to be

²⁵ Jerome to Demetrias, “A Letter.”

²⁶ Jerome to Demetrias, “A Letter.”

an active character, but that they can still be blamed. This argument is not unique to Paul and Jerome, but rather the arguments they made are a product of the society they are in. Jerome still proves that a modern definition is needed as he changed from Paul's definition to referring to how women must be passive, and there should be no interaction between men and women. The letters written by both men were not years apart, showing that the meaning of the text had already changed in a short period, meaning that in modern times there needs to be a new definition as it has changed again.

Modern Definition and Understanding

Paul's original meaning is no longer applicable to society as the words meaning has changed. It is important for a scholarly discussion of the text to have a definition that is based on what the text originally intended, however in order to understand the text through a modern lens, people need to look at how the text is being used today and how it is defined today.

The meaning has been changed and no longer was Paul's as soon as he sent the letter. Often readers will try to examine text through the author's intent, but there is a literary theory that states once a work is made available to the public, the intent no longer applies as it is now defined by the readers. Scholars of religion have been falling into an intentional fallacy by trying to understand what Paul intended. Intentional fallacy is the "mistaken belief that the interpretation of the text should be based on the author's intentions."²⁷ As soon as Paul sent the letter, its meaning became up to the interpretation of the reader. This has made it change meaning over time, which is why the modern definition should be easily changeable. This definition will be as of 2023 and again it will be a broad and vague definition in order to make it as timeless as possible. In order to make the most comprehensive definition the sources will be

²⁷ "Thesis Help," April 12, 2023

from the Vatican, as Roman Catholics represent a large population of Christians. The other sources will be from American Christian fundamentalist speakers and influencers. Both groups keep extensive digital records of what they believe and therefore finding a definition shared between them will be easily supported.

The Vatican has not referenced Romans many times, but their stance on “unnatural” and their definition can be based on how they cite Paul. In 1986, the Vatican released a statement about the care of homosexual people. In this they specifically cite Romans 1:18-32 and look at what “unnatural” means. The statement is:

“In Romans 1:18-32, still building on the moral traditions of his forebears, but in the new context of the confrontation between Christianity and the pagan society of his day, Paul uses homosexual behavior as an example of the boldness which has overcome humankind. Instead of the original harmony between Creator and creatures, the acute distortion of idolatry has led to all kinds of more excess. Paul is at a loss to find a clearer example of this disharmony than homosexual relations.”²⁸

The Catholic Church takes a stance in this that fits closely with the intent of the author. They also include what Townsley had commented on about Pagan societies and idol worship. They fall into the intentional fallacy where they try to only listen to the authors intention, instead of how the text interacts with the current world. The change occurs in how they view people. While Paul was incredibly unforgiving in his judgments of “unnatural” acts, the Catholic Church calls for people to care. However, this care is still overshadowed by a lack of acceptance and because of that it does not accomplish the goal. By saying that Paul is who should be listened to, the Church is supporting intolerance. They are defining “unnatural” as anything which goes against the teachings of the Catholic Church, and includes homosexuality and Paganism. However, this

²⁸ Joseph Ratzinger, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons,” news release, October 1, 1986, accessed April 19, 2023, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19861001_homosexual-persons_en.html.

is complicated further by the Congregation for Catholic Education, who bring gender into the discussion. They argue that alongside homosexuality, transgenderism is also to be discouraged. This reading of Romans is not as common, but it can be argued that going against gender roles includes changing from ones assigned gender. The text continues to condemn not just transgenderism but also polyamory. This means that all LGBTQIA+ people, through their existence, are going against what is written. Therefore, the definition by the Catholic Church is that “unnatural” refers to anything against Christian Church teachings, and in the case of Romans 1:26-28 it refers to any non-heterosexual relationship outside the confines of marriage.

In terms of protestant beliefs, sermons and opinions are vital to look at. It is mainly important to look at people who were given large platforms with which they spread their ideas. One such person is John MacArthur, a pastor who gave many of his sermons on a Christian radio and television program. By using technology available to him, he was able to reach a large group of people, giving him a large sphere of influence. MacArthur analyzes Romans 1 in his sermon *Judgement on a Reprobate Society*²⁹. In this sermon he talks extensively about how the LGBTQIA+ community is evil, and goes against his definition of “unnatural.” Much of this sermon is blatantly homophobic rhetoric, and he especially emphasizes the idea that homosexuality is a choice people make to go against God. He defines “unnatural” as the perversion of true worship, by saying, “Sex perversion comes from spiritual perversion. That’s why Paul uses homosexuality as his first illustration. When a man perverts true worship, he perverts the supernatural world, he perverts the spiritual; he’ll find perversion occurring in the physical because he’s lost his moorings.”³⁰ To MacArthur, “unnatural” is perversion which he

²⁹ John MacArthur, “Judgement on a Reprobate Society,” speech, Grace to You, last modified December 11, 1977, accessed April 19, 2023, <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/1261/judgement-on-a-reprobate-society>.

³⁰ MacArthur, “Judgement on a Reprobate,” speech, Grace to You.

primarily defines as homosexuality. He also says that the punishment for that perversion is that “seventy-five percent of all venereal disease belongs to homosexuals.”³¹ MacArthur chooses to blame homosexual people for any hardships they face, implying that God has turned His back on them and that they will die for their sins. This narrative is incredibly harmful and is part of the reason why so many died in the AIDS epidemic and why the only reason AIDS started to be researched more was when it transferred to heterosexual people. He portrays homosexuality as the enemy and ends with a call to action against “the enemy” before ending in prayer. This call to action includes asking God to help against homosexuals, which he had already said were being punished. It is a contradiction which is left unacknowledged. To MacArthur, “unnatural” refers to perversion or anything that is not heterosexual. This definition can be seen throughout the “religious right’s” arguments.

The next to look at is the late Jerry Falwell. He “was a fundamentalist Christian Pastor,” who had a large platform and is “best known for his key role in mobilizing the Christian Right into a formidable power in the United States politics.”³² He did this through the founding of “the Moral Majority in 1979, a national political organization that emphasized a commitment to a “pro-family” agenda.”³³ Falwell published sermons which can be accessed for free online, and was highly influential during his life. He often cited Paul’s teachings in support of his “pro-family” agenda. Other fundamentalist sermons agree with what he says and cites his sermons, therefore his sermon can be used to represent the fundamentalist view of “unnatural.” Falwell has a sermon titled *God’s Three Deadlines and How they Apply to our Nation*, which is based on

³¹ MacArthur, “Judgement on a Reprobate,” speech, Grace to You.

³² Rozell, Mark. “Jerry Falwell (1933-2007).” Encyclopedia Virginia, December 22, 2021. <https://encyclopediaofvirginia.org/entries/falwell-jerry-1933-2007>.

³³ Rozell, “Jerry Falwell.”

J. Harold Smith's sermon *God's Three Deadlines*, in which he preaches about Romans 1:21-32.³⁴ This sermon is from 2009 however it still aligns with many fundamentalist beliefs today. He looks at the text from an Euro-American centric lens, and uses an eisegetical reading to support his own bias against homosexuality and non-Christian beliefs. The sermon starts with Falwell talking about himself studying Romans 1:18-32 and asking "why did God give people up, [and] what happened to people when God gave them up."³⁵ He sets this sermon up to encourage how best to save people from what he views as mistakes of the past. Next he ties in American politics, saying that God is giving the American people up or has given them up because President Clinton won against Bush. He uses patriotism and religion throughout his sermon to justify his blatant homophobia, transphobia, and xenophobia. His first definition of natural is a natural law which he says is recognized by "great nations." This implies that "unnatural" refers to what people other than alleged great nations practice, as he uses the text to justify hate and othering. His definition of unnatural moves beyond sex, and into nationalism. He continues on to say, "There is a body of law that is called 'inalienable rights' or 'self-evident truths.' This body of law is the basis of American law, British law, and Roman law."³⁶ In this he is defining "natural" as Euro-American centric, and changing the meaning from sex to politics. This idea continues when he says, "Historians tell me all of Western Civilization is built on natural law, while Communist rule and most governments that arise out of the bush (i.e. Third World Nations) are based on social contract, or what is pragmatically good for the people as they work out an agreement through revolution or some social process."³⁷ In this passage he is saying that Western

³⁴ Jerry Falwell, "God's Three Deadlines," speech, Sermon Central, last modified September 9, 2009, accessed April 19, 2023, <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/god-s-three-deadlines-jerry-falwell-sermon-on-law-138935?page=5&wc=800>.

³⁵ Falwell, "God's Three," speech, Sermon Central.

³⁶ Falwell, "God's Three," speech, Sermon Central.

³⁷ Falwell, "God's Three," speech, Sermon Central.

Civilization is built on what God intended, while there is struggle for those who do not follow what God intended. He also cites “historians” but does not give any examples providing a false sense of credibility to his argument. He is playing into pathos, by creating a sense of fear. He is saying that if people do not listen to him and try to live a good “Western” life then they will be viewed as the enemy or the unfortunate. Paul’s intention was to warn people, but Falwell takes it to be a threat that must be used to maintain order.

The result of not listening to the natural is what Falwell defines as the three deadlines: “1. God gave them up to sexual impurity, 2. God gave them up to homosexual acts, 3. God gave them up to homosexual civilization.”³⁸ He frames these deadlines in what is happening to America according to him. He continues his political claims throughout the sermon and twists Paul’s teachings to imply they are about America. He starts with “God gave America up to sexual impurity,” where he strays further from Paul’s original meaning.³⁹ America did not exist when Romans was written, nor was it predicted. Falwell forces the text to align with America, by saying that what the Romans were doing is what Americans are doing. Essentially he says that Americans now replace Romans in world power. He moves further from Paul’s original message, instead of just talking about sex, he says the passage is about not following the Ten Commandments in schools, and banning prayer in schools. He then says, “We knew it was wrong to take God’s name in vain, but the so-called free speech movement brought filthiest and blasphemy into our grammar schools,”⁴⁰ implying Romans is also referring to non-sexual rules that are in the Christian Bible. He also is putting the text in terms of America, instead of the historical intent. Next he turns his attention to sex. He starts by talking about the “physical body”

³⁸ Falwell, “God’s Three,” speech, Sermon Central.

³⁹ Falwell, “God’s Three,” speech, Sermon Central.

⁴⁰ Falwell, “God’s Three,” speech, Sermon Central.

and how it should be pure but is corrupted by television and media. Then he talks about how people are having sex without consequences. He blames this on the “misuse of birth control pills” and Roe V. Wade which legalized abortion.⁴¹ According to Falwell this means that people no longer respected natural Western ideals. Through this he changes the definition to additionally mean more than just sex, and instead it applies to anything he finds morally wrong. He touches briefly on homosexuality, comparing it to child abuse, rape, and bestiality. “There was a time when two homosexuals were caught in an act they were discharged from the military, or in public life they were brought before a judge for indictment.”⁴² This is in line with what people tend to cite Romans with. Romans is often used to justify homophobia and Falwell chooses to continue that practice by saying that it is “unnatural” and deserves to be punished. Then he turns back to his focus on how any sexual content is bad. This is just in his first section, as he moves into homophobia like MacArthur, as his sermon continues.

His next focus is that “God Gave America Up To Homosexual Acts.”⁴³ In this he adds to the definition what is to be expected. He gives additional focus to homosexuality then any other “unnatural” practice. This include child abuse, meaning that he views homosexuality as a greater concern than child abuse. Texts like this are often used to target minorities and it is especially effective because those groups are unable to get the same recognition and platform in order to defend themselves. He is also focusing on the part of the text which talks about “unnatural sex.” Falwell begins by implying that homosexuality is an active force which malevolently forces its way into America. Then he says, “God gives up on a nation when it has allowed homosexuality to find a place in society.”⁴⁴ This line again plays to ethos and reinforces his definition of

⁴¹ Falwell, “God’s Three,” speech, Sermon Central.

⁴² Falwell, “God’s Three,” speech, Sermon Central.

⁴³ Falwell, “God’s Three,” speech, Sermon Central.

⁴⁴ Falwell, “God’s Three,” speech, Sermon Central.

“unnatural” as anything that he does not believe fits into a Western society. At this point the definition that can be made is that “unnatural” is anything which contradicts one of the Ten Commandments, goes against gender roles, sex which is not between a man and a woman, and any attention to sexual content outside of marriage. However, he does not say that the sex within marriage has boundaries unlike Paul who said only procreative sex was allowed. He also encourages marital, pro creationist sex, unlike Paul who merely tolerates it. By ignoring this he is able to target minorities such as the LGBTQIA+ community, while not isolating his followers. Although he made a broad definition in the beginning, he changes it when referring to “unnatural sex” to mean only homosexuality. According to Falwell,

“To correctly interpret this second deadline, we must look at the word “vile affections,” because God gave them up to vile affections. The phrase, ‘affections’ means lust or desires. God left them alone to do what their lower nature wants. The word ‘vile’ means ‘infamous,’ that which is ‘grossly criminal, shocking, or brutal.’ These are stern words that introduce homosexual activity.”⁴⁵

He makes his thoughts on what the text is referring to abundantly clear. He also takes away from the broadness of Paul’s words, to use the text to only target homosexuality. Next, he moves into what this means for America, as that is his main focus. He starts by talking about the military, saying that homosexuals in the military is “the erosion of national security, national protection, and the symbol of national strength.”⁴⁶ America is represented by the military and therefore homosexuals in the military are the logical target. He then says that homosexuals are infiltrating the government. His exact words are “not to long ago I was appalled to see a picture of gays who have come out of the closet and have their picture taken...We are getting the homosexuals in Congress, the Judiciary, the White House, and in appointed Cabinet positions.”⁴⁷ The first

⁴⁵ Falwell, “God’s Three,” speech, Sermon Central.

⁴⁶ Falwell, “God’s Three,” speech, Sermon Central.

⁴⁷ Falwell, “God’s Three,” speech, Sermon Central.

LGBTQIA+ Cabinet member was appointed by President Trump, which was after this sermon was given, meaning that he creates lies in order to justify his usage of Romans. Falwell tries to strike fear with lies, because it makes the issue much more authentic to his listeners.

Unfortunately, this lie takes away from his credibility as a source, yet that has almost no effect on those who agree with him. His next attack is on the AIDS crisis. Falwell implies that the AIDS epidemic was proof of God turning away, because it was only targeted at homosexuals. He says “AIDS is nature’s consequence for breaking natural law,” implying that natural is heterosexuality. This is followed by him saying, “as God is giving up on America, He is allowing AIDS to pass from the homosexual community to the heterosexual community.”⁴⁸

Which blames LGBTQIA+ people for God giving up. This creates a them vs. us mentality, and promotes a new definition of “unnatural” is referring to the “other.” As long as a person follows fundamentalist Christian teachings, they are not part of the other and therefore not engaging in the “unnatural.” This section develops the definition into two parts. The first is defining “unnatural” as anything that is considered the “other” and does not fit with “Western Civilization.” The second is defining “unnatural sex” as homosexual sex.

His third part is “God Gave Them Up to a Homosexual Civilization.”⁴⁹ This part combines his previous threats and continues to incite fear. He says that a homosexual civilization does not mean “every person will be homosexual” but rather where “Christians will live in a world that has a homosexual lifestyle. Christians will live in a world that is anti-God and anti-Christian. Christians will live in a world of persecution and martyrdom.”⁵⁰ He implies that Christians are the oppressors and need to make sure that the oppressed do not take over. This is a

⁴⁸ Falwell, “God’s Three,” speech, Sermon Central.

⁴⁹ Falwell, “God’s Three,” speech, Sermon Central.

⁵⁰ Falwell, “God’s Three,” speech, Sermon Central.

fear mongering tactic which further demonizes LGBTQIA+ people in order to justify their oppression. He is also trying to play the victim by saying that homosexuals are evil, when they are not the ones in power to oppress people. This portion of his sermon brings to light how he is twisting Romans in order to fit his agenda. To do that all he had to do was change the understanding. He changes his definition again to say that “a homosexual lifestyle is a) rebellion against law, b) rebellion against God, c) rebellion against purity, d) arrogantly supporting only themselves, and e) mean spirited and vengeful.”⁵¹ This is the definition of “unnatural” according to Falwell, and within that he is adamantly including homosexuality. He continues to move the text away from sex, and instead adds the law and America. He then turns back to religion saying that originally America was Christian and therefore homosexuality was illegal, however as people started to act with compassion and recognition America started becoming corrupt. He says that the next step was legal acceptance and that America would need to undo all of this to be saved. According to Falwell, “we become a homosexual civilization because the majority have at least experimented with it, and they are larger than just a minority of Christians and other Americans who find it reprehensible.”⁵² This means that it is not only the act of “unnatural” but the acceptance that is an issue. He finishes the sermon by asking people to accept Christianity and not homosexuality, pushing further for the othering of LGBTQIA+ people.

Falwell switches between wanting to have a broad definition, and a narrow targeted one. Therefore definition two must be split into what is “unnatural” and what is “unnatural sex.” “Unnatural” can be defined as a “homosexual lifestyle” and going against Euro-American Western ideals. This is the broad definition. However, “unnatural sex,” can be cited as meaning homosexual sex.

⁵¹ Falwell, “God’s Three,” speech, Sermon Central.

⁵² Falwell, “God’s Three,” speech, Sermon Central.

The belief of the “Religious Right” has not changed since Falwell and MacArthur examined Romans. Franklin Graham, an evangelist wrote on February 1, 2023 about how Americans are “abandoning the moral and spiritual precepts that have long informed our nation with God’s objective truth.”⁵³ He quotes MacArthur saying “A reprobate mind means you don’t even function. There’s no way back because you aren’t rational. You start making laws to protect people who are insane. Why do I say that? Because they don’t know whether they are male or female. How insane can you be?”⁵⁴ This quote examines again. How gender effects the discussion of “unnatural” and it means that gender is included in the *definition*. Most of his argument is based in what previous pastors had said about Romans, and proves that the definition has not changed.

Conclusion

To decide on a modern definition, the commonality between Fundamentalist and Catholics has to be examined. In both cases they agree that in Romans 1:26-27 Paul is referring to homosexuality. The approaches to dealing with homosexuality differ as Fundamentalists believe that it should be irradiated, while Catholics believe homosexual people should be cared for as if they have a disease. For most modern groups the common definition is homosexuality, and that should be looked at when discussing the passage in modernity. This has changed from Paul’s intent which was saying that: “unnatural” refers to any sex which is non-procreative, outside of marriage, and goes against gender roles. Regardless of Paul’s intent, this definition is how it is being used today and must be remembered when in conversation. Unfortunately, the meaning of unnatural is now twisted in order to promote hate and bigotry. Now that there is a

⁵³ Franklin Graham, “Franklin Graham: This Present Darkness,” *Decision Magazine*, February 1, 2023, accessed April 19, 2023, <https://decisionmagazine.com/franklin-graham-this-present-darkness/>.

⁵⁴ Graham, “Franklin Graham.”

modern definition the conversation needs to shift to a discussion about the treatment of others and the validity of Paul's argument.

Bibliography

- Brooten, Bernadette J. "Romans 1:18-32: A Commentary." In *Love Between Women*, by Bernadette J. Brooten, 215-66. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, n.d.
- Falwell, Jerry. "God's Three Deadlines." Speech. Sermon Central. Last modified September 9, 2009. Accessed April 19, 2023. <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/god-s-three-deadlines-jerry-falwell-sermon-on-law-138935?page=5&wc=800>.
- Graham, Franklin. "Franklin Graham: This Present Darkness." *Decision Magazine*, February 1, 2023. Accessed April 19, 2023. <https://decisionmagazine.com/franklin-graham-this-present-darkness/>.
- Jerome. Letter to Demetrias, "A Letter from Jerome," n.d. <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/1282.html>.
- MacArthur, John. "Judgment on a Reprobate Society." Speech. Grace to You. Last modified December 11, 1977. Accessed April 19, 2023. <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/1261/judgment-on-a-reprobate-society>.
- Mathur, Maya. Letter to the author, "Thesis Help," April 12, 2023.
- Miller, James E. "The Practices of Romans 1:26: Homosexual or Heterosexual?" *Novum Testamentum* 37, no. 1 (1995): 1–11. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1561233>.
- Murphy, David. "More Evidence Pertaining to 'Their Females' in Romans 1:26." *Journal of Biblical literature* 138, no. 1 (2019): 221–240.
- Ratzinger, Joseph. "Considerations regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions between Homosexual Persons." News release. July 31, 2003. Accessed April 19, 2023. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20030731_homosexual-unions_en.html.

Ratzinger, Joseph. "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons." News release. October 1, 1986. Accessed April 19, 2023. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19861001_homosexual-persons_en.html.

Romans 1:26-27. New Revised Standard Version. <https://www.biblegateway.com/>.

Rozell, Mark. "Jerry Falwell (1933–2007)." *Encyclopedia Virginia*, December 22, 2021. <https://encyclopediaivirginia.org/entries/falwell-jerry-1933-2007>.

Sanders, E. "St. Paul the Apostle." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, January 5, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Paul-the-Apostle>.

Townsley, Jeramy. "Paul, the Goddess Religions, and Queer Sects: Romans 1:23—28." *Journal of Biblical literature* 130, no. 4 (2011): 707–728.

Versaldi, Giuseppe Cardinal Versaldi. "'Male and Female He Created Them' towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education." News release. February 2, 2019. Accessed April 19, 2023. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20190202_maschio-e-femmina_en.pdf.

Wheeler-Reed, David. *Regulating Sex in the Roman Empire: Ideology, the Bible, and the Early Christians*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017.

Wheeler-Reed, David. "Judaism." In *Regulating Sex in the Roman Empire: Ideology, the Bible, and the Early Christians*, 39-62. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017.

Wheeler-Reed, David. "New Testament." In *Regulating Sex in the Roman Empire: Ideology, the Bible, and the Early Christians*, 63-84. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017.

1 Corinthians 5. New Revised Standard Version. <https://www.biblegateway.com/>.

1 Corinthians 7. New Revised Standard Version. <https://www.biblegateway.com/>.