

# The Apostle Paul on Sexuality: A Response to Neil Elliott

By Robert A. J. Gagnon

My friend Neil Elliott has recently posted a short article on the Internet entitled “The Apostle Paul on Sexuality” (<http://thewitness.org/agw/elliott071203.html>). Neil is the author of *The Rhetoric of Romans* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1990) and *Liberating Paul* (Orbis Books, 1994). In his internet article Elliott contends that Paul in Rom 1:18-32 was thinking only of the emperor Nero and a predecessor, Gaius “Caligula,” both of whom were connected with emperor worship and sexual excesses. Paul allegedly did not have in view “faithful and loving” homosexual unions. Elliott believes that his new reading makes sense of Paul’s argument—an argument that otherwise “disintegrates” into the “incoherence” of “prejudiced exaggeration,” “stereotype,” and “caricature.”

Neil creates a problem of his own making and then attempts to solve it with a proposal that does not speak to the concerns of Scripture.

1. There is no way that Paul’s argument in Rom 1:18-32 can be restricted to, or focused primarily on, current and recent emperors whom even “pagans” recognized to be exceptional fruitcakes. The whole point of the discussion in 1:18-3:20 is to “charge” that “both Jews and Greeks—all—are under sin” (3:9), that “*no one* is righteous, *not even one*” (3:10, alluding to Eccl 7:20), and that “the *whole* world” is “under God’s judgment” (3:19), “for *all* have sinned and are lacking in the glory of God” (3:23). A critique limited to a couple of emperors would not establish this point.

2. In Rom 1:18-32 Paul has in mind the past lives of the converts at Rome, not the particularly dissolute existence of Caligula and Nero. How do we know this? Later in Romans 6:15-23 Paul looks back on the discussion in 1:18-32 as he discusses the question, “Should we sin because we are not under the law but under grace?” Does he remind the Roman believers about the antics of a couple of wacky emperors? No—he reminds them about their own behavior at the time that they were unbelievers. Formerly they had been “slaves of sin” (6:17-18, 20) and had “presented [their] members to sexual uncleanness and to [other forms of] lawlessness for the [doing of] lawlessness” (6:19; compare 1:24, 27-31). Paul characterized the “fruit” of their past life as “things of which [they] are now ashamed, for the outcome of those things is death” (6:21; compare 1:32). Paul had made similar remarks to the Corinthian converts in 1 Cor 6:9-11 (note that the letter to the Romans was probably written from Corinth): “Stop deceiving yourselves: Neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor ‘soft men’ (i.e., effeminate males who play the sexual role of females), nor men who lie with males . . . shall inherit the kingdom of God. *And these things some of you were*; but you washed yourselves off, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and in the Spirit of our God.” To make sense of Paul’s argument in Rom 1:18-32 one need not look any further than the past behavior of his converts. The lives of Caligula and Nero are quite beside the point.

3. Certainly the critique against idolatry in Rom 1:19-23 was not limited to worship of the emperor, which in any case met with widespread disapproval among the elite in Rome. In the Roman forum or city center, as with the *agora* or marketplace of provincial cities, there were more temples to more gods than one could shake a stick at. Is Neil suggesting that Paul had in mind only emperor worship and no other pagan cult when he spoke of exchanging “the glory of the imperishable God in the likeness of a perishable human and birds and four-footed animals and reptiles” (1:23)? And if Paul’s critique of idolatry is not focused on emperor worship, why should the critique of same-sex intercourse be so focused?

4. Paul condemns not just male-male intercourse in Rom 1:24-27 but also female-female intercourse (1:26). What does that have to do with the activities of Roman emperors? Neil points out that Caligula and Nero sometimes forced themselves on other men. What do coercive acts have to do with Paul’s description of the mutuality of male-male intercourse in 1:27: “males . . . were inflamed in their longing for *one another*, males with males . . . receiving back in *themselves* the payback which was necessitated by their error”? And does he think that Paul believed that males raped by the emperor were recompensed by God for the sin committed against them? Moreover, is Neil seriously arguing that, had Nero committed himself to a faithful sexual relationship with one man, whether as the receptive partner, active partner, or both, Paul would have had no qualms? Nero is reported to have “married” his former slave Sporus, whom he treated as his “wife,” dressing him as empress and even having him castrated. Would Paul’s only objection have been to the castration and cross-dressing? What about Nero’s public “weddings” to his slave Pythagoras or to his freedman Doryphoros, in which Nero himself played the role of “wife,” replete with bridal veil and dowry? Would Paul’s only problem here have been that Nero acted too much like a woman? Or that a slave or a freedman was involved? We must remember too that in using the term *arsenokoitai* in 1 Cor 6:9, “men who lie with males,” Paul was picking up the Greek translation of the absolute prohibitions of male-male intercourse in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, texts that use the terms “male” (*arsen*) and “lying” (*koite*). In other words, Paul, with all other Jews, understood the prohibition of male-male intercourse absolutely.

5. Neil’s argument is the equivalent of contending that Nero’s sexual passion for his mother or Caligula’s sexual exploits with his sisters gave incest a bad name. In other words, by this line of reasoning, Paul in 1 Corinthians 5 was strongly opposed to a case of an incestuous union between a man and his stepmother because some Roman emperors had not done incest as well as it could be done. There was nothing structurally incompatible about a man-mother or adult brother-sister union per se that would have caused Paul to proscribe all incestuous unions, regardless of degree of consent and commitment?

6. What about the fact that the critique of same-sex intercourse is not limited to Paul but extends to the whole canon of Scripture, to say nothing of the univocal perspective against all same-sex intercourse that existed in the Judaism of the Second Temple and rabbinic periods? How could biblical writers not writing in Paul’s time have had Caligula and Nero in view? Is Neil suggesting that Paul’s view of same-sex intercourse represents

a radical innovation to his Jewish heritage? At the beginning of his article Neil states that “a handful of Bible passages that seem to address homosexual practice have received a degree of attention out of all proportion to their number or weight.” This is a misunderstanding on two counts. First, there is an array of interconnected texts in both Testaments, extending well beyond the Levitical prohibitions and Rom 1:24-27, that clearly indicate a strong, pervasive, and absolute opposition to same-sex intercourse (see my book, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, for the evidence). Second, the “number or weight” of scriptural texts given over to proscribing man-mother incest and bestiality is comparable to, or less than, the attention given same-sex intercourse. Is Neil contending that some authors of Scripture might not have regarded man-mother incest or bestiality as a big deal? Or that we should not regard such sexual immorality as a big deal?

7. The truth is that Neil has misunderstood Paul’s presentation in 1:18-32 in general and his critique of same-sex intercourse in 1:24-27 in particular. Regarding the former: In Rom 1:18-32 Paul is beginning his brief for universal *culpability* (not just for the universality of sin). He starts with the easier case, the culpability of Gentile idolaters, and brushes with broad strokes. Those who disoriented themselves by a turn from the true God were more likely to be disoriented in their behavior. Every Jew recognized that, on the whole, idol-worshipping Gentiles were greater sinners, both quantitatively (they sinned more) and qualitatively (they sinned more egregiously). That was a “no-brainer,” though Paul stressed here not merely this fact but also that Gentiles were rendered *liable* because they sinned against the revelation about God and God’s will available to them in creation/nature. Not every Gentile idolater committed same-sex intercourse or every one of the sins mentioned in the continuation of the vice list in 1:29-31. But collectively their entanglement in sin was self-evident, certainly to any Jew or even to any Gentile God-fearer. The harder case was to demonstrate that Paul’s own people, the Jews, stood under God’s wrath. Paul already begins to make that case in 2:1 (indeed, even in 1:23, which echoes Ps 106:20 on the golden calf episode), but especially does so in earnest in 2:17-3:20 (continued, in fact, through the end of ch. 4). The different reading of Rom 1:18-3:20 made by Stanley Stowers (to which Neil alludes), and to some extent earlier by Neil himself and others, has not persuaded most Pauline scholars.

8. As regards Rom 1:24-27, Neil argues as if the only thing that would have upset Paul—or any other biblical author, or Jesus—about same-sex intercourse was a tendency toward exploitation, multiple partners, or impermanence. This is false. What made same-sex intercourse in Paul’s eyes “unclean” or “impure,” self “dishonoring” or “degrading,” “contrary to nature,” and “indecent” was not a dearth of love or fidelity. There were enough examples of non-exploitative forms of same-sex intercourse in antiquity (see *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 347-60). Furthermore, there were many theories in the Greco-Roman world positing biological influence on the development of one or more forms of homoerotic behavior—Platonic, Aristotelian, Hippocratic, and even astrological (see *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 380-95; and especially my forthcoming article, “Does the Bible Regard Same-Sex Intercourse as Intrinsically Sinful,” *Christian Sexuality* [ed. R. Saltzman; Kirk House]). If Paul had wanted to make exceptions for nonexploitative homoerotic unions entered into by persons biologically or socially

predisposed to homosexual behavior, he could have done so within his own cultural context.

No, what troubled Paul and all the authors of Scripture (and almost certainly Jesus; see *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 185-228) was something endemic to all same-sex intercourse, whether particularly exploitative or not. Same-sex intercourse represented a structurally incongruous attempt at merging sexually with a sexual same, with someone who was not a gender complement, and therefore not a person that could bring completion in the sphere of sexual relations to the sexual self. In short, the problem with same-sex intercourse is that it does not restore the original sexual unity portrayed in Gen 1:27 and 2:21-24. There a binary, or sexually undifferentiated, human is split down the “side” into two constituent parts, male and female. Sexual relations are pictured as a reconstitution or re-merger of these two parts into a sexual whole. Men and women are different. They are different in ways that complement—fill in the gaps and moderate—the sexuality of the other. That difference constitutes an essential prerequisite for all sexual unions. Sexual attraction for persons of the same sex amounts to sexual self-absorption and narcissism or, perhaps worse, sexual self-deception: a desire either for oneself or for what one wishes to be but in fact is. It is a misguided attempt at completing the sexual self with a sexual same when true integration requires a complementary sexual “other,” a sexual “counterpart.” “One-fleshness” is not just about intimacy. It is first and foremost about structural congruity. Similarly, there is structural incongruity or incompatibility in a sexual relationship between an adult child and parent, a man and his adult sister, humans and animals, and adults and children. Concerns about fidelity, monogamy, permanence, and love come into play only once the prerequisites for an acceptable sexual union have been met.

9. The echoes to Genesis 1-2 are evident in Paul’s two main discussions of same-sex intercourse: Rom 1:24-27 and 1 Cor 6:9 (cf. 1 Cor 6:16; see *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 289-97). Paul had in mind the standard set by God in creation—as did Jesus in Mark 10:6-8—not how badly or well same-sex intercourse was done in Paul’s cultural environment. His readers would have picked up these echoes to the creation stories. But Paul’s argument goes further in Rom 1:24-27. Paul is asserting that even Gentiles who are unaware of the revelation of Scripture have enough revelation in creation/nature to know that males and females, not females with females or males with males, are complementary sexual beings. In effect, Paul is saying: Start with the obvious “fittedness” of human anatomy; when done with that, consider procreative design as a clue; then move on to a broad range of interpersonal differences that define maleness and femaleness. This is a much better clue to God’s will for human sexuality than preexisting and controlling passions—passions that can be warped by the fall and shaped by socialization factors.

10. Finally, Romans 1:18-32 gives no support to the notions that same-sex intercourse is something other than an egregious case of sin or that grace means not judging another person’s behavior. Neil is incorrect when he claims: “homosexual desire appears [in Rom 1:24-27], not as a *sin*, but as a punishment that God imposes on idolaters.” Paul held up same-sex intercourse as a prime and extreme example of human suppression of the truth

about God and God's will evident in creation and nature. The term "sexual uncleanness" (*akatharsia*) employed for same-sex intercourse appears later in Rom 6:19 as a synonym for the word "sin" (*hamartia*, 6:16-18, 20, 22-23). It usually occurs in conjunction with two other synonyms for sexual sins: *porneia* ("sexual immorality") and *aselgeia* ("licentiousness"); so 2 Cor 12:21; Gal 5:19; Col 3:5; Eph 4:19; 5:3; used of adultery in 1 Thess 4:6-7). The "punishment" or, better, "payback" (*antimisthia*, 1:27), is not homosexual desire itself but God's removal of all help in restraining the behavior that issues from preexisting sexual desire. And this "payback" is not distinguished from sin any more than is the continuation of the vice list in Rom 1:29-31. Rather, God's "giving over" represents the first installment of divine wrath that culminates in judgment on the final Day (1:32; 2:3-16). If the wrath of God manifests itself in the present time by God allowing people to be controlled by immoral innate desires that lead to self-degrading and impure behavior, then the salvation of God can be nothing other than the deliverance of persons from the control of such sinful impulses. This is the whole point of Rom 6:19 and indeed of Romans generally: "For just as you presented your members as slaves to sexual uncleanness and to [other forms of] lawlessness for the [doing of] lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness (i.e., right behavior) for [the purpose of living in] holiness." As Paul makes abundantly clear in Rom 7:6 and 8:1-17, the Spirit of Christ becomes our new empowering force for right conduct. This does not mean, necessarily, that deeply ingrained sinful impulses will be eradicated (see Gal 5:17). But it does mean that the Spirit, rather than these impulses, can now exercise dominion over our behavior. Paul says it best: "Sin shall not exercise lordship over you; for you are not under the law but under grace" (6:14). "So, then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors not to the flesh, that is, to live in conformity to the [sinful passions of] the flesh, for you live in conformity to the flesh, you are going to die. But if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are being *led* by the Spirit of God, *these* are the children of God" (8:12-14).

An opposition to same-sex intercourse is not a "sexual prejudice," as Neil suggests—at least not any more than an opposition to adult consensual incest or "threesomes." A "prejudice" is "a judgment or opinion formed without knowing the facts or in spite of the facts" (Webster). In this case, knowing what Scripture says and why it says it decidedly favors those who lovingly and humbly hold to an "other-sexual" (heterosexual) prerequisite for acceptable sexual behavior. The real "sexual prejudice" is the insistence that such a prerequisite is inconsequential to Scripture and inconsequential to Jesus. Conforming oneself to homoerotic desires, like conformity to any sexual impulses that God deems immoral, is "conformity to this world" and the opposite of "transformation by the renewal of the mind" (Rom 12:2). At least this is what Paul, Jesus, and the whole of Scripture tell us.

**Robert A. J. Gagnon is Associate Professor of New Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, author of *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Abingdon Press, 2001), and co-author of the forthcoming *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Fortress Press, 2003). He has articles on homosexuality available at <http://www.pts.edu/gagnonr.html>. He can be reached at [gagnon@pts.edu](mailto:gagnon@pts.edu).**

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