

A Christian Psychology of and Response to Homosexuality – October, 2011

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Homosexuality has not been a biblical abstraction in my life. That doesn't mean I am coming out of the closet here. The skeletons in my closet don't look quite like that; they are probably worse, and they are not the topic of this lecture, thank God.

What it means is Dale: my best friend in college coming over to announce that he was gay and therefore intended to kill himself on his 23rd birthday--and then me spending the next year talking him out of suicide.

What it means is Roger: my roommate while in grad school, who died of AIDS before medicine learned how to keep people with HIV alive. Our last conversation on the phone a few hours before he died was one-way because he could no longer speak. It was just me sharing the gospel with him, trying to point him to Jesus again, knowing that was the day he would meet the Maker.

Dale and Roger, both dear friends, responded to same-sex attraction (SSA) by "coming out of the closet" and adopting a gay identity, a much less popular step to take in the '70s than in 2011.

But of course things have changed, to the point that such a step now may earn popularity points.

In a Gallup poll in 2010, for the first time a majority of Americans, 52%, called homosexuality morally acceptable, while only 43% said it is immoral.

For younger evangelicals, homosexuality is not a moral abstraction for them either. For them it brings familiar and friendly faces to mind immediately. For me now, as an elder in my church and a counseling professor in a Baptist seminary, I think of Terry and Karl and Dave (and I could go on) committed Christian men who came for counseling because no matter how much they tried, their sexual compass pointed more to men than women.

These men have had to grapple with the meaning of same-sexual desires.

- Does this mean I am Gay?
- Was I born this way?
- Did God make me this way?
- I surely wouldn't set my own compass in this direction. If God's design is for heterosexuality, what happened to me?

- I don't think I chose this, so can I choose my way out of it? Can my sexual compass be reset, redirected through prayer or some array of spiritual practices or through counseling or therapy?
- If I didn't choose to point my sexual compass in this direction, is it sinful?
- Do I repent of SSA...or is it merely a temptation and that I need to resist it as one would any temptation?

So that is the topic of this lecture – *A Christian Psychology of and Biblical Response to Homosexuality*.

How to think about the homosexuality of my friends was one of the first major cultural challenges I faced when I became a believer in my late twenties. The condemnation of homosexuality in the Bible didn't make sense to me. As a psychologist and an aspiring empiricist, I could see that homosexuality was atypical and in a sense abnormal, but does it really have to be *wrong*? Maybe it's just different, like left-handedness, or perhaps it's some type of disorder some people are unwillingly afflicted with - but this is a form of neurosis that requires treatment, and not a moral or spiritual issue.

Eventually however, regardless of my own attitudes toward homosexuality, it seemed clear, and beyond any hermeneutically sensible doubt that Scripture forbids and condemns both homosexual practice and passions, and does so using hard-nosed terms such as “shameful, unnatural, and dishonorable” in Romans 1, “unrighteous” in 1 Corinthians 6.9 and 1 Timothy 1.9-10, and “detestable” or “an abomination” in Leviticus 18.22 and 20.13.

Surely, homosexuality is a watershed issue with respect to the interpretation, authority, and relevance of Scripture. But that is not the torch I am bearing here. My intent in this lecture is not to provide a biblical theology or ethical analysis of homosexuality. (See Robert Gagnon's book *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 2001.)

I am going to presume the majority opinion, a conservative biblical hermeneutic and sexual ethic that views every aspect of homosexuality as a product of the fall and of sin--that it's not the way it's supposed to be. And, I shall avoid the political squabbles so ever-present in media world. Even though political issues are not unimportant, I do believe that following Jesus at this point in God's plan is more rescue mission than culture war.

Someday when He is ready, Jesus will win the culture war, overwhelmingly—after His rescue mission is complete. And that mission is our mission for the time at hand, and also it is the mission of this paper.

I want in particular to note my debt to Mark Yarhouse and Ed Welch, both Christian psychologists whose thinking and writing in this area have in my estimation been seminal.

How will the church understand persons who struggle with SSA, and what should the hope and help that we offer look like?

What should you say to your friend or your son or your daughter if they come to you and say, “I think I’m gay.”? How did their sexual compass get so offset?

Can they change, and if so, what type of change can be expected, even hoped for?

How will you counsel and minister to them?

Effective ministry, according to David Powlison, requires of us a triple exegesis: of Scripture, of people, and of this beautiful and crazy world in which we live.

The movement from Scripture to real lives in this world requires careful and clear-eyed understanding of all three. So, what I have tried to do is listen first to the Bible and then to the social sciences—at least those parts of them that from my perspective deserve a hearing. Let’s start with defining what we are talking about, with a few descriptions and definitions.

Mark Yarhouse helpfully differentiates same sex attraction, homosexual orientation, and a gay identity.

(1) Same-sex attraction is an intentionally descriptive term describing the direction of a person’s sexual desire. SSA can vary in strength and also in durability or longevity. It can be weak or moderate or strong, and it can be temporary or enduring. The term “SSA” is merely descriptive and says nothing about how a person feels about his or her sexual attraction, or what they intend to do or actually do with their sexual desires, nor does it say anything about their identity—who they are or how they label themselves.

Approximately 6% of men and 4.5% of women report experiencing at least some degree of same sex attraction (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels, 1994).

(2) Same-Sex Orientation (SSO) is the term I prefer to use since the term homosexual often connotes an identity. What it means is that some people experience SSA in such a manner that it is predominant compared to opposite-sex attraction, and such that it is strong and durable and persistent. Like the term, SSA, SSO is a merely descriptive phrase.

Approximately 2% of men and 1% of women report a same-sex or homosexual orientation, wherein their primary and predominant sexual attraction is to the same sex.¹

¹ These figures rise in urban centers; in other words, those with a homosexual orientation are more concentrated in cities.

It is possible for a person to be sexually attracted to both sexes, to varying degrees, and that person might identify themselves as “bisexual.” It is also possible, although less frequent, for a person’s experience of same-sex attraction to be limited to a specific person, and for them to be otherwise heterosexual.

(3) Gay or lesbian identity: Some persons choose to adopt a homosexual identity, taking as a key feature of their identity their same-sex sexual orientation, and usually along with that accepting same-sex erotic behavior as a morally neutral or morally good sexual alternative.

The percentage of adults who identify as being gay or lesbian is estimated to be 1.7%, approximately 4 million persons. An additional 1.8% of our population was estimated to view themselves as bisexual (Gary Gates, Press release April 7, 2011, Williams Institute).

What is crucial to recognize here is that these three categories are not coterminous. They do not or at least should not be collapsed into one another. While it may be the case that a person experiences SSA or even is completely SSO, a gay or homosexual identity is not an experience and it is not inherent. Identity is a decision based upon one’s perspective on their sexual desires and their acceptability; in other words, the adoption of a gay identity is a value-based choice rather than a given fact of experience or of psychology or biology.

With respect to identities, they don’t happen to us, they come from us: “I” am the central organizer and active agent in forming my identity. Even though most of us are not aware of choosing our identities, they are our construction built out of the raw materials of who we are, our life experiences, especially key relationships, and all of this construed or interpreted in light of some prevailing narrative or worldview or philosophy of life.

So, our identity is a personal construction project composed of many conscious and subconscious choices which accumulate gradually over time. Of particular importance are the attributions that we make about ourselves and that others apply to us, which function like scripts for how we manage our lives. To a significant extent these identity scripts are provided by the various social authorities within our culture: parents, peers, religion, “science,” “psychology.”

Now, with respect to the development of *sexual* identity, some parts of that are biogenetically hard-wired and other parts are shaped by key relationships within particular cultures with particular values and views about the way things are supposed to be. And of course, at the center of all this is the active, responding, choosing person, made in the image and likeness of God but also fallen biologically and psychologically or spiritually, and embedded in a fallen world.

So, identity is *personal* and it is *contextual*; it is innate, but also it is formed in the context of a web of relationships, not unlike the way children develop language – with brains and tongues

pre-designed to speak, but this innate capacity to communicate is formed by family, friends, and culture.

Most psychologists recognize that identity is as much a construction as it is an expression of one's essence, and that personal values, beliefs, and religious commitments are "grist for the mill" producing the identity that one constructs. Among developmental psychologists, there are two camps which emphasize different elements in identity development, essentialists (nature) and social constructivists (nurture).

The modern language of sexual identity, "homosexual, bisexual, gay, lesbian," is a good example of this mutual interaction between person and culture. Although homosexuality has been practiced for millennia, "gay" as an identity is an historical artifact, belonging only to contemporary western culture: it is a personal and social interpretation and not an incorrigible fact.

Although homosexual behavior has been practiced in other cultures throughout history, we are the first culture in which people refer to themselves this way. There was never a language for it, and there has never been community support for this kind of identification or labeling. Until recently there was not even a way to say it (Yarhouse, 2010).²

Sorting these matters out on a personal level is a process; a person who experiences SSA is confronted with a unique dilemma: what *does this mean about me*, that I am attracted to the same sex? People attracted to the same sex go through a process that could be summarized in two stages.

- a. Identity Crisis: this is a painful knot of emotion – shame, guilt, anxiety, depression – with lots of confusion and many questions. If you've never listened to a person in this phase, do so, or at least read about it. This will help you understand the challenge of finding hope when something so fundamental to your person and to your gender is upside down and you can't just flip a switch and set it right (see *Washed and Waiting* by Wesley Hill or Andy Comiskey's various books).

But people don't stay in crisis mode forever; eventually they come to some type of resolution.

² Coincidentally, this is often a part of the gay critique of the biblical passages on homosexuality; they are correct when they claim that these categories and terms did not exist in the ancient biblical languages. Instead, more descriptive terms that described what that person does, or terms like natural and unnatural were the verbal categories relied upon to discuss these matters (Hays, 1996).

- b. Identity Attribution: a synthesis and consolidation of same-sex attractions. Eventually, people come to conclusions about themselves and their sexual experiences based on some sort of interpretive paradigm, or script that is available to them in their world, and with respect or disrespect for the moral script that God has placed within every human heart.

These identity attributions occur much earlier these days, around 15 years of age; versus at 20 years in 1970 (Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2004). Another interesting recent phenomenon is that some young persons are choosing to avoid the adoption of any label at all regarding their sexual identity.

In contemporary western culture, there are two prevailing narratives or scripts, ways to respond to and integrate SSO. The first is to adopt a gay or homosexual identity. This is based on a Gay Explanatory Framework (GEF) (Yarhouse & Tan, 2004): the self is defined by sexual desire; sexual attraction defines who I am, categorically, just like an “alcoholic” defines who he is by his desire for alcohol.

This identity formula is very much at home in a culture of expressive individualism, which prizes self-expression above all else (see R. Bellah’s *Habits of the Heart*, 1996). The GEF relies upon metaphors like “discovery” or “coming out” to describe identity attribution. The GEF reaches beyond personal experience into the academy, developing its own personality and developmental theories which include an ideal or “healthy” socialization process, and which has unfortunately been adopted in the public square and public schools in most of western culture.

Usually the Gay Explanatory Framework is characterized by simplistic explanations of cause, especially biological reductionism—i.e., “Since I am not aware of making a conscious decision to feel this way, I must have been born this way. This is obviously biological.” According to this script, personal fulfillment depends upon sexual self-actualization, the embracing and expression of one’s sexual desires, with some sort of “coming out” ritual whereby the person is initiated into a new lifestyle in which same-sex sexual and romantic relationships are deemed either neutral or good, and even sometimes superior.³

While most people struggling with SSA or SSO in our culture believe the Gay Explanatory Framework is the only plausible option, there is another option, one that does seem increasingly

³ It is this incorporation of homosexuality into the center of that person’s identity that makes even the most sensitive and winsome conversation so difficult with a person who identifies themselves as “gay”. If “gay” is who you are, then even the kindest challenge or disagreement is perceived at least as a personal rejection, and at worst as hateful or “violent.” Since this is the accepted normative narrative in most of the First World, any other view seems to be just so much nonsense. David Wells captures this dislocation well in his definition of worldliness as “that system of values, in any given age, which has at its center our fallen human perspective, which displaces God and his truth from the world, and which makes sin look normal and righteousness seem strange. It thus gives great plausibility to what is morally wrong, and for that reason makes what is wrong seem normal” (*Losing our Virtue*, 1998, p.4).

strange, even abnormal to modern and post-modern people. The second identity option is to understand SSA or SSO by means of a Christian Explanatory Framework, taking Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Final Restoration as the definitive narrative for explaining same-sexual desires. This framework is honest about the experience of SSA or SSO but views it as unnatural and disordered, inconsistent with God's will for sexuality.

The key issue, for anybody, and particularly for Christians, is which of our desires and affections we choose to be defined by. A Christian with SSA will, like the rest of us, emphasize their identity in Christ and in the body of Christ, and view same-sexual desires as a product of the Fall, just one of many forms of sexual deviation and temptation that can be overcome by God's grace. They will grieve over their SSA, and some will repent of it depending upon how they understand its origin and how they understand sin and guilt and repentance. A Christian Explanatory Framework comprehends the reconstruction of our identities upon adoption into the family of God: "Now, God is my Father, Christ is my brother, I am a son/daughter of the Lord. 'I' (in the deepest sense of that little word) belong to Him. He redefines and redirects every part of my being."

With respect to the origin of SSA and SSO,

What causes it? Where does it come from?

While the person is the active and responsible agent with respect to their sexual desires, there are both nature and nurture factors related to the development of sexual attraction. So, there are things that come at the person and things that come from within the person. While there does not seem to be any single universal cause, "if this occurs, then that develops" the biological and social sciences do point out a few common factors that are helpful in understanding SSA.

The current scientific research and theory can be divided into three areas: biological, temperamental, and relational:

- **Biology (genetics, intrauterine hormones, neurological):** while researchers in the '80s and '90s believed that genes or brains would offer the strongest contribution to SSA/SSO, more recent research has not supported earlier theories that genes or brains play a primary role in homosexual development. The better twin studies with larger sample sizes do not support a big genetic contribution to homosexual orientation. The concordance rate among identical twins was 20% for men and 24% for women (Bailey, Dunne, & Martin, 2000), which indicates that genes may play a role, but not in themselves an overwhelming one. Studies examining brain contributions are even less impressive. Even though there are some studies implicating brain structures, these studies have not been

replicated. Even when brain differences have been found, sorting out cause and effect is nearly impossible with correlational research.

Another possible biological contributor still under investigation is the prenatal hormonal environment. Fetal development of sexual characteristics is a product of interaction with hormones, especially testosterone, and this may play a role in sexual orientation in some instances, but the data are not clear at this point.

Nonetheless, that there may be *some biological contributions in some persons* would not be surprising and does seem consistent with the research. The recognition that biology may play a role need not be resisted by Christians since God has created us as embodied souls, psychosomatic beings, and all things, including our bodies and brains and genes, have been infected by sin. In addition, that something such as the body or the brain is influential, or even formative, does not mean it is morally or spiritually determinative. It seems reasonable to accept, and clearly consistent with Scripture, that bodies and brains and genes along with parents and peers and cultures all play influential or formative roles in our lives. But that doesn't mean they are determinative.

- Effeminate temperament features or gender non-conformity: Both anecdotal and research evidence supports a positive correlation between gender non-conformity and homosexuality (Hamer, 1994; LeVay, 1996).⁴ Many homosexual men report feeling different and less masculine than the other boys during childhood. They tended to be more sensitive, less naturally aggressive, and more aesthetically than athletically inclined. This is sometimes referred to as the “sissy” phenomenon. Dean Hamer, a gay geneticist, in his book *The Science of Desire* (1994) goes so far as to write, “Most sissies will grow up to be homosexuals, and most gay men were sissies as children. Despite the provocative and politically incorrect nature of that statement, it fits the evidence. In fact, it may be the most consistent, well-documented, and significant finding in the entire field of sexual-orientation research” (p. 166).
- Exotic Becomes Erotic theory by Daryl Bem (1996) contends that at puberty we will experience sexual arousal by the gender that we find exotic, or by that gender which seems so different from oneself. In other words, “opposites attract.” So, if as a child a boy feels like the other boys, but different from the girls, at puberty he will find girls no longer abhorrent but fascinating and then attractive and arousing. On the other hand, if a boy does not feel like he fits in with the boys and instead is more comfortable with the girls, at puberty he finds himself fascinated by the boys and then erotically attracted to

⁴ In its most extreme manifestation, Gender Identity Disorder, $\frac{3}{4}$ of boys with this disorder later report a homosexual or bisexual orientation (DSM-IV, 1994, p. 536).

them. The biogenetic variable in this theory is the child's innate temperament, especially traits such as aggressiveness and activity levels.

- Parental relationships: Early theories, rooted in Freud's psychoanalysis, viewed homosexuality as a kind of developmental disorder—an impairment in psychological development (which does often seem to be the case) with parents as the culprits (which does not necessarily seem to be the case). However, these psychoanalytic explanations were based more on clinical experience and less on empirical research. More rigorous recent research lends little support to the traditional view that SSO is a direct result of absent or critical fathers and smothering mothers. The research does not indicate a primary role for parents as a *sufficient* cause of homosexuality; most children with troubled parental relationships do not turn out with SSA. At the same time, of course, there can be no reasonable doubt that parents play an important formative role in most aspects of child development. And, there does seem to be a preponderance of difficulties in the father-son relationship for many SSO men, and on the other hand a preponderance of negative experiences with men in SSO women. Even though these factors are not sufficient or determinative, they do seem to be significant influences in some instances of SSO (Yarhouse, 2010, p. 230, n. 21-24; Yarhouse & Burkett, p.175, n. 2).

Faulty development of masculine traits may be related to the father-son relationship, especially the extent to which the son feels connected to and then identifies with his father as a male, so that he develops the sense that "I'm like him" or "I want to be and can be like him." On the other hand, it may be that for some boys the sissy phenomena may be more innate (related to genetic predisposition or to the brain or to prenatal hormones), and then subsequently the boy and his father find it difficult to relate to one another because they are so temperamentally different, which of course would further diminish the boy's sense of masculinity.

- Peer influences: Boys who are less aggressive and masculine understandably feel disenfranchised and different. Unfortunately, they are often avoided or are the subject of derision or bullying by their peers, which can be devastating to a boy's gender identity and masculine confidence.
- Early sexual experiences (abuse; early debut): While neither physical abuse nor neglect are correlated with homosexuality, studies have found some correlation between early sexual abuse and homosexual behavior in men, but not in women.⁵ It is not difficult to

⁵ Wilson, H., & Widom, C., 2009. Does Physical Abuse, Sexual Abuse, or Neglect in Childhood Increase the Likelihood of Same-sex Sexual Relationships and Cohabitation? A Prospective 30-year Follow-up. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 39 (1), 63-74).

imagine how sexual abuse, especially of a boy by a man, could be extremely disruptive to the boy's developing sexual identity.⁶ At the same time, it is important to remember that most boys who are sexually abused by men do not become same-sex oriented. Early, consensual same-sex behavior is also found more frequently in the history of male homosexuals. But, cause and effect are difficult to sort out in these correlational studies.

- Personal choice? The personal experience of most, but not all, persons with SSA is that it is not chosen, but instead is found, and often with shock and shame. This is particularly true for men and for at least half of the women. While most men with SSA/SSO believe their homosexuality was not consciously and explicitly chosen, 30-50% of lesbian women report that it was a choice.

So, what “causes” homosexuality? According to the human sciences, there are two honest answers to that question: “We don't know for sure” and “Probably several things.” The principle of equifinality is helpful here. Equifinality is the principle of multi-causality: that in open systems a given end state can be reached by many potential means. In the same way that there are several ways to get from here to San Francisco, there are several ways a person may develop SSA or SSO.

So there are a handful of common factors that seem significant, but there is no one-size-fits-all formula.⁷

Transitioning now from this overview of social science research and theory, we can now take up the question:

Can people change SSA or SSO, and if so, how do they change?

Change efforts come in a variety of contemporary secular formats: traditional psychoanalysis (C. Socarides, E. Moberly), reparative psychotherapies (J. Nicolosi), and gender-affirming encounter groups such as Journey into Manhood.

Do they work? It depends who you ask.

⁶ Dube, S. et al. (2005) found that 16% of adult men reported being sexually abused before age 16. They had been abused by men 70% of the time. *Am J Prev Med*;28(5), p. 433.

⁷ The APA (American Psychological Association) states the following about etiology in their pamphlet, *Sexual Orientation and Homosexuality*: “There is no consensus among scientists about the exact reasons that an individual develops a heterosexual, bisexual, gay, or lesbian orientation. Although much research has examined the possible genetic, hormonal, developmental, social, and cultural influences on sexual orientation, no findings have emerged that permit scientists to conclude that sexual orientation is determined by any particular factor or factors. Many think that nature and nurture both play complex roles; most people experience little or no sense of choice about their sexual orientation.” *American Psychological Association* (2008). “Answers to your questions: For a better understanding of sexual orientation and homosexuality”.

In 2009, The American Psychological Association Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation “concluded that efforts to change sexual orientation are unlikely to be successful. . . Given the limited amount of methodologically sound research, claims that recent SOCE [sexual orientation change effort] is effective are not supported” (pp. v and 2).⁸

Unfortunately, the composition of the task force was not methodologically sound either. Their objectivity was doubtful since each of the six authors, five psychologists and one psychiatrist, is on record as gay affirmative and several of them publicly identify as gay or lesbian.⁹

There are a couple of studies which indicate some degree of success in changing SSA by means of secular therapies, with 44 to 66% of persons reporting significant change of some sort, but the degree of change and what changes is quite variable (NARTH, 1997; Spitzer, 2000).

There are several different Christian counseling or ministry options:

Leanne Payne’s charismatic approach blends psychoanalytic theories of homosexuality with a focus on the inner healing of traumatic memories through “listening prayer.”

Christian recovery groups such as Courage, a 12 step program for Roman Catholics, and Homosexuals Anonymous (14 instead of 12 Steps).

Andy Comiskey’s Living Waters groups blend biblical teaching on gender, identity, and sanctification with some of the theories of the reparative therapies and inner healing, and emphasize the role of the Church as a healing community.

Mark Yarhouse and Warren Throckmorton’s Sexual Identity Therapy, which is less focused on changing same sex attractions and more focused on choosing one’s identity in Christ and the incorporation of behavioral and cognitive methods to facilitate the process of progressive sanctification.

Finally, there are other approaches that incorporate theories about the development of masculinity into the process of progressive sanctification. (Alan Medinger; Gerard van den Aardweg).

⁸ A review of 83 studies published in peer reviewed journals from 1960 to 2007 discusses people who attempted to change their sexual orientation through counseling or therapy.

⁹ Joseph Nicolosi, of the National Association for Research and Therapy for Homosexuality, commented, “The Task Force’s standard for successful treatment for unwanted homosexuality was far higher than that for any other psychological condition. What if they had studied treatment success for narcissism, borderline personality disorder, or alcohol/food/drug abuse? All of these conditions, like unwanted homosexuality, cannot be expected to resolve totally, and necessitate some degree of lifelong struggle” (The 2009 APA Task Force Report – Science or Politics?, posted Jan. 10, 2011, NARTH website).

Do these work? Here also there are only a couple of good studies and they found that 23-29% of persons reported a complete change in orientation from homosexual to heterosexual, and 60-70% reported behavioral success. (Schaeffer, et al., 1999; Jones and Yarhouse, 2007, 2009)

Mark Yarhouse's summary of this research is helpful:

Those who argue that there is “insufficient evidence” of sexual orientation change are often thinking of categorical and complete change, as though sexual orientation were a light switch that is in one of two positions: on or off. Homosexual or heterosexual. Gay or straight. On the other hand Christians can sometimes add to the problem by claiming this kind of complete change happens frequently. . . . Some people do report a change in attractions over time. For those who report a change, it tends to come in the form of a reduction in homosexual attractions, but these reductions are typically not complete. A smaller number of people also report an increase in heterosexual attraction. [In some instances this may be attraction to the opposite sex in general; in other cases it may reflect attraction to only one individual or the opposite sex, such as a person's spouse]. . . . It may be helpful to everyone involved to recognize that 180-degree change or categorical change is less likely. That doesn't mean people shouldn't attempt change or feel discouraged about it, but it does help us identify the more likely outcomes. In some ways, understanding this will free a person up to focus on other important considerations, such as vocation, stewardship, and Christlikeness (2010, pp. 89-90).

Listening to the Bible

Regardless of the particular causes identified by science or the success of sexual orientation change efforts, God aims to interpret and govern and redeem every part of our us, including our sexual experiences, desires, identity, and even one day our bodies. The good news of God is that whatever is distorted and broken can and will in God's good time be restored and healed. Christ assumed a full human nature to heal all of human nature. The incarnation and bodily resurrection of Christ is God's pledge of full and final healing (Gregory of Nazianus).

But the reception of God's grace begins with a humble acceptance of what is wrong with us, with a kind of biblical psychopathology.

It seems that a biblical macro-psychology of homosexuality begins with the Pauline version of the Fall in Romans 1: an account of the origin of sin, with homosexuality as a vivid example of its dynamics. In that passage Paul attributes the origin of same-sex passions and practices to a failure to “thank and honor God,” in other words to disordered worship. Humanity's original

rejection of God then incurs His judgment and His passive, and yet terrible, wrath, wherein the passage says, God “gave them up” (v. 24, 26, 28). He simply lets them alone, leaves them to their own devices, giving them over to impure lusts, dishonorable passions, and a debased mind. So, in this passage, disordered desires of all sorts result from disordered worship. St. Augustine’s biblical psychology is helpful here: The root of all evil is wrongly directed desire.

Both Richard Hayes and Ernst Kasemann note that in this passage homosexuality, along with a string of other disordered desires and practices, is the consequence of God’s wrath, not the cause of it. Homosexuality is probably singled out because it is such a clear rejection of something so obvious—God’s complementary design for the sexes and of sexual intercourse itself.

But it is important to note that Paul’s account here is archetypal or generic; he is giving the history of humanity and of sin in general, with homosexuality as a particularly graphic case in point. He is not giving us a history of any particular person’s development of homosexuality. The Bible’s account of this chapter in human history goes like this: As a result of the rejection of God’s rule, God steps aside, and the consequence is the reign of sin and satan, a Kingdom in which everybody is born defective (Rom. 6:17) with deformed desires, some of which are common to all men, such as selfishness and pride, and others that are unique to some men. And this is where personal psychopathologies begin.

The typical experience of same-sex attraction, that it is not consciously chosen, is in fact consistent with our innately sinful condition, which in itself is not chosen—we are born that way. Sin is a chronic condition and sometimes, but not always, a conscious choice. This is the human condition Paul describes in Romans 7, where he goes back and forth, but he ultimately cites “sin in me” as the source of his sinful behavior. So, the starting point for a biblical psychology of homosexuality is fundamentally no different than the origin of many of our sin-driven character flaws, whether it is selfishness and narcissism, or jealousy and envy, or a bad temper, or worry and anxiety, or mania or depression, or addictions or whatever. Everybody is born congenitally defective with some innate bio-psychological weakness, which finds its origin in the fall and subsequently in hearts and bodies riddled with the cancer of sin. (Eccl. 9.3; Jer. 17.9)

According to New Testament scholar Robert Gagnon:

For Paul, all sin was in a sense innate in that human beings do not ask to feel sexual desire, or anger, or fear, or selfishness—they just do, despite whether they want to experience such impulses or not. If Paul could be transported into our time and told that homosexual impulses were at least partly present at birth, he would probably say, ‘I could have told you that’ or at least ‘I can work that into my system of thought.’ . . . Paul paints

a picture of humanity subjugated and ruled by its own passions; a humanity not in control, but controlled (2001, p. 431, 430).

In the same vein but with more emphasis on human accountability, Richard Hayes writes,

As great-grandchildren of the enlightenment, we like to think of ourselves as free moral agents, choosing rationally among possible actions, but Scripture unmaskes that cheerful illusion...the Bible's sober anthropology rejects the apparently commonsense assumption that only freely chosen acts are morally culpable. . . . The very nature of sin is that it is not freely chosen. . . . We are in bondage to sin but still accountable to God's righteous judgment of our actions. . . . In light of this theological anthropology, it cannot be maintained that a homosexual orientation is morally neutral because it is involuntary (1996, p. 390).¹⁰

Up to this point we have been talking about SSA, a particular dis-orientation of a person's sexual compass, but we could be talking about the infinite variety of sinful orientations of any of our hearts which are less than consciously chosen, but for which we will be held accountable by God. I think this is Paul's point in Romans 2 and 3, when he segues from God's judgment of homosexuality to God's judgment of everybody, in what Richard Hays calls a "homiletical sting operation":

Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself. . . . Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? (Romans 2:1-3) Paul makes it clear: no one has a secure platform to stand upon to judge others. (R. Hayes, 1996, p. 389)

MINISTRY/ COUNSELING

The truth is that each and every one of our sex lives, every look, every touch, every fantasy, and every desire within our hearts will be judged by our holy, holy, holy God.

According to Jesus, in Matthew 5.29-30, when it comes to sex, what we do with the desires of our hearts is a matter of life or death. So, "If your eye or hand causes you to sin, *tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell.*" That ought to give all of us pause. This is serious business, according to Jesus.

¹⁰ Perhaps a good example of this is our dreams at night. And, if yours are like mine, I bet some of them are not morally neutral. And yet even though they are involuntarily and subconsciously created . . . whose dream is it? Who created and produced that dream? And if it is your production, who should repent of it?

So, the church's response to SSA must be just as serious. It must be as theologically bold and as morally clear as Jesus is, and at the same time as pastoral and gracious as Jesus is. And we must bring hope: like oxygen for the soul—to those who struggle with same sex attraction. And this is that hope:

The Gospel changes the most important things initially, and it changes everything eventually.

What I mean by Gospel and change is a type of faith in and obedience to Christ that flows out of a fundamentally re-oriented heart, resulting in a changed and changing life.

In closing, there are four ways we can promote change in our churches and families for those who struggle with same-sex attraction.

First, the essential starting point is BE HONEST WITH YOURSELF, OTHERS, AND GOD.

In view of the mercy of God, it makes no sense to avoid, deny, or minimize SSA. I would like to propose that there is a properly Christian form of “coming out of the closet.” Should we not all come out of the closet with anything we find inside that is broken and wrong? We do this so that we can repent more thoroughly and receive all the help and healing that comes through authentic Christian relationships.

That which we keep to ourselves tends to fester and swell, and what is left is that painful knot of shame and guilt. The alternative to authenticity is not a pretty thing: loneliness, duplicity, secret sins, anxiety, self-hatred, and sometimes suicide.

It is here that the response of parents, peers, and church is so important. It is the responsibility of Christian families and communities to cultivate openness to the acknowledgment and confession of same-sex attraction. What can we do to move in this direction?

Second, we can CULTIVATE A RENEWED RESPECT FOR DIFFERENCES.

We need relationships characterized by respect and acceptance in which various forms of masculinity are affirmed, of course, that are true to one's God-given gender, but also cognizant of a variety of temperaments. We should not presume that cultural stereotypes are biblical norms or guidelines. There is more than one type of man, and not all of them like to camp or play sports. (Could somebody explain to me how Ultimate(ly Foolish) Fighting became a fad among young evangelical men!?) My colleague Robert D. Jones says that the greatest man he has ever known described himself as gentle and humble in heart! It was this Lord who said, “Blessed are the meek/gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.” If the character of Jesus is not the main part of your view of manhood, then it is not biblical manhood.

Probably one of the most important changes would be to eliminate within our communities, especially among men, the unedifying words that denigrate men whose masculinity is not so evident, who may have some effeminate characteristics. Such words are unconscionable. What if that were your brother or your son that was being made fun of? How would Jesus speak to him? And how would Jesus speak to those who spoke to him that way???

I still remember my best friend Dale announcing his homosexuality to me. He had heard me use terms like “fag, queer, homo” and many other false bravados characteristic (I wish only) of teenage boys. He said he would have told me sooner, but he was afraid of my reaction, even that I might attack him physically. That changed how I talk.

Third, we can EXPRESS A TYPE OF EMPATHY FOR PERSONS WITH SSA THAT COMPREHENDS HOW LEVEL THE PLAYING FIELD IS UNDER THE CROSS.

It is important to realize and openly acknowledge that at the deepest and most important level we are much more like the person who struggles with SSA than we are different. They have their particular sin tendencies and temptations, and you have yours. Every one of us has a weak link, a form of remnant sin for which we need Jesus and one another. Therefore same-sexual sin should not be singled out as a red-letter sin.

Fourth, PROVIDE BIBLICAL HOPE FOR CHANGE.

Real and substantive change can be expected for people with SSA or SSO, as it can and should be for all who have chosen to follow Christ. Tim Wilkins says when he turned away from homosexuality, *“I decided that although I honestly did not know how to become heterosexual, I did know how to be obedient. . . . Same-sex attractions continued throughout college and seminary, but to a lesser degree. I remained steadfast in refusing to give in. . . . I told God ‘it does not matter if I am ever attracted to a woman as long as I get You!’ What mattered most to Tim was becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ.”*

Change for the Christian is a grace-fueled process that for good reason is called *progressive sanctification*: a long obedience of faith down a narrow and often difficult road, in the company of other Christian men and women within the local church. All this is rooted in the transformative power of the Gospel of God and the rich soil of the body of Christ. The cross of Christ signifies the beginning of the end of the old self, a progressive and radical reordering and re-orientation of every one of our distorted desires. But sin is stubborn, especially at the level of desires, and the old man dies slowly. Nonetheless, according to Paul, that old man is history: *“Such were some of you. . . . But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified. . . .”* (1 Corinthians 6.11) That sounds like past tense.

As it is with many root sins that are lodged deeply within us, change may or may not be associated with a complete elimination or reversal of SSA, for now. But make no mistake about it: under the cross and in Christ neither the past nor our desires determine our identity or our future. Paul's instruction in Romans 6 is to be who you are, *in Christ*.

*Romans 6:11-14, So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God **in Christ Jesus**. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. . . . For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.*

This Spirit-fueled, Christ-following *progressive* sanctification includes an understanding of who we are: identities that originate in God's good creation—made by and like and for Him, and then born again in a miraculous New Creation. Change like this includes a type of humble authenticity that does not flinch in examining and repenting of the distorted but dwindling effects of sin on all things: "Where sin abounds, grace abounds even more." Someday this grace will culminate in our final sanctification, when the King returns and resets everything. On that day, True North will be irresistible. Such is our hope.

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