

transforming homosexuality

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WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT
SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND CHANGE

Denny Burk
Heath Lambert


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But if you consent to evil desires and haven't struggled against them, you will have to bewail your defeat; and I hope you do bewail it, or you may lose all sense of sorrow. . . . What we long for, of course, is that these evil desires should not even well up from our flesh. But as long as we are living here, we are unable to bring this about.

—Augustine, *Sermon 152 on Romans 7:25–8:3*

But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.

—*The Apostle Paul, Romans 6:17–18 (NASB)*

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Foreword

The modern secular consensus is that an individual's pattern of sexual attraction, whether heterosexual or homosexual, should be accepted as a given and considered normal. More than that, the secular view demands that this pattern of sexual orientation be accepted as integral to an individual's identity. According to the secular consensus, any effort to change an individual's sexual orientation is essentially wrong and harmful. The contemporary therapeutic worldview is virtually unanimous in this verdict, but nothing could be more directly at odds with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The New Testament reveals that a homosexual sexual orientation, whatever its shape or causation, falls out of line with the Creator's purpose for humanity. All sinners who are saved by the Lord Jesus Christ know the need for the redemption of our bodies—including our sexual selves. But those with a homosexual sexual orientation face another dimension to this reality: they also need a fundamental reordering of their sexual attraction. About this, the Bible is clear.

But the issue here is not merely undoing same-sex attraction. Christians know that heterosexuals are just as in need of sexual redemption as homosexuals. The Bible and the testimony of the gospel point us to the cross of Christ and to the sinner's fundamental need for redemption, not for mere moral improvement. Further, the Bible offers no hope for any human ability to change our sinful desires—only the power of the gospel can do that.

The believer in the Lord Jesus Christ receives the forgiveness of sins, the gift of eternal life, and the righteousness of Christ imputed by faith. But the redeemed Christian is also united with Christ, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and given means of grace through, for example, the preaching of the Word of God. The Bible reveals that God conforms believers to the image of Christ, doing that work within the human heart that sinful humans cannot do themselves. The Bible reveals that believers are to grow into Christlikeness, knowing that this growth is a progressive process that ends with their eventual glorification at the end of the age. In this life, we know a process of growing more holy, more sanctified, and more obedient to Christ. In the life to come, we will know perfection as Christ glorifies his church.

This means that Christians cannot accept any argument suggesting the impossibility of fundamentally reorienting a believer's desires in such a way that increasingly pleases God and is increasingly obedient to Christ. To the contrary, we must argue that this process is exactly what the Christian life is to demonstrate. As Paul writes, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The Bible is also honest about the struggle to overcome sin and sinful desires. Paul writes about this in Romans 7, but the exhortations of the entire New Testament also make this clear. Christians who experience same-sex attraction must know that these desires are sinful. Thus, faithful Christians who struggle with these desires must know that God wants both their affections and their patterns of attraction reordered according to his Word. All Christians struggle with their own patterns of sinful desires, sexual and otherwise. Our responsibility as Christians is to be obedient to Christ, knowing that only he can save us from ourselves.

These are challenging theological issues and represent one of the urgent pastoral tasks of our time. This is why Denny Burk and Heath Lambert's new book, *Transforming Homosexuality: What the Bible Says about Sexual Orientation and Change*, is such a tremendous gift to the church. These men are scholars of the highest caliber with pastoral hearts. Further, in this book Burk and Lambert keep the hope of the gospel and Christ's cross and resurrection at the very center of their counsel. Something as deeply entrenched as a pattern of sexual attraction is not easily changed—our doctrine of sin explains that—but we do know that with Christ all things are possible.

Christians know that believers among us struggle to submit their sexual desires to Christ. This is not something true only of those whose desires are homosexual. It is true of all Christians. Yet we know that those believers who are struggling to overcome homosexual desires have a special struggle—one that requires the full conviction and support of the body of Christ. We will see the glory of God in the growing obedience of Christ's redeemed people. And, along with the apostle Paul and all the redeemed, we will await the glory that is yet to be revealed to us.

R. ALBERT MOHLER JR.

PREFACE

Why Do We Need This Book?

This is not a typical Christian book about homosexuality.

Most Christian books on homosexuality deal with the topic of homosexual behavior and what the Bible says about its sinfulness. These books are important. As our culture continues to devolve on this matter, the biblical teaching has come under growing attack. For millennia, Christians have believed and taught that the Scriptures sanction sexual activity only in the context of marriage between one man and one woman for life. They have held that any sexual desire or behavior outside of marriage is sinful. This understanding has certainly been the case for homosexual behavior, which is condemned in every single passage of Scripture that addresses it. We affirm that interpretation of Scripture,¹ and have even written about it.² We are thankful for our brothers and sisters in Christ who continue to articulate biblical fidelity about homosexual behavior.³ We pray for them and desire to encourage them in their work. Our task here, however, is different in two ways.

Our goal is not to consider, again, the ethics of homosexual behavior, but to consider the ethics of homosexual desire, often referred to as homosexual orientation. Faithful Christians are united in their rejection of homosexual behavior. However, there is not as much clarity when it comes to issues of orientation or same-sex attraction. The goal of our work in this book is to establish from Scripture that desires for a sinful act are sinful precisely because the desired act is sinful. We will carefully define same-sex attraction and show from the Bible why it is sinful.

There is another element of our book that is different from other books treating the topic of homosexuality. Almost every Christian book on this topic focuses exclusively on ethics. And, whether we are discussing desires or behavior, the matter of ethics is crucial. We must know which desires and behaviors are sinful and which ones are righteous. Ethics, however, is not the only challenge confronting the church today. Another pressing reality is ministry. People who struggle with homosexual desires and behaviors need to change. They need to experience progress in holiness. That is why this book also focuses on helping our brothers and sisters in Christ to know how to pursue this change. Biblical change means transformation into the image of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18). What the Bible commands, therefore, is not heterosexuality, but holiness (Eph. 1:4).

We write this book as men who are concerned about sexuality in general. We have both written books on the ethics of sexuality and on ministering to those with sexual problems.⁴ Quite frankly, sex is important. It is the source of intense joy and profound pain. We desire to help the church think more deeply about the important issues of human sexuality.

We also write this book as men with concerns about the direction of our culture concerning homosexuality in particular. Most Christians have been surprised by the velocity of cultural change on the issue of homosexuality. Just one measure of that change is the acceptance of homosexual marriage. In 2005, same-sex marriage was illegal in every state in America. In 2015, the Supreme Court of the United States has declared same-sex marriage to be a constitutional right nationwide.⁵ That is a tremendous amount of change for one decade. There has never been a period of human history in which the church has confronted such a challenge as this one. Our desire in these dark days is to help the church to embrace the light of Christ on these crucial matters.

We also offer this book as men with concerns about the evangelical response to the important issue of homosexual orientation. Faithful Christians are resisting the cultural tide and affirming the traditional teachings of Scripture on the matter of homosexual behavior. The issue of orientation, however, has thrown the church a curveball. As the church encounters modern “insights” about homosexual orientation, many are struggling to come to terms with what should be believed and taught. New ideas about sexuality are where loyalty to Christ is being tested in our time. It is one thing when a young Christian has not been taught well on these issues and needs discipleship and correction. But it is quite another thing when a professing believer embraces a studied rejection of Christ’s word. In our day, beliefs about sexuality have become a line dividing sheep from goats. We cannot overemphasize the fact that the stakes really are that high, and our rendering of sexual orientation is a big part of that discussion. We want to contribute to the church’s growing wisdom on this matter as we move together toward biblical fidelity on this crucial issue.

We desire for this book to bring about change. That is the reason we titled it *Transforming Homosexuality*. We want people who have struggled with homosexual desire to know the transforming power of Jesus Christ, which leads to holiness. The Bible teaches that transformed behavior grows out of transformed thinking (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:23; Col 3:10). Because this is true, we believe that the best way for people to be transformed in their experience of homosexuality is to be transformed in their thinking about homosexuality. We need the grace of Jesus Christ to bind our consciences to his Word and to gift us with this transformation. It is our prayer that he would use this book as one means to provide this gift.

Part One of this work focuses on the ethics of desire. Chapter one defines sexual orientation and offers a critique of the idea

that it is a morally neutral concept. Chapter two explores how the Bible's teaching about temptation, desire, and sin maps onto the concepts of sexual orientation and same-sex attraction. Part Two of our book explains how people experiencing same-sex attraction might experience transformation. Chapter three clears away five common "myths" about what that transformation looks like. Chapter four charts a path of transformation based on repentance. Chapter five concludes with some ways that the church needs to "transform" its own ways of thinking about and of ministering to those with same-sex attraction.

This book is offered with the conviction that sexuality is a wonderful gift from our sovereign God that is to be enjoyed within the context of marriage. We are heartbroken by the pain and turmoil that people experience when they attempt to obtain the joys of sexuality outside the marital bond. Our modest work here is offered with the prayer that the glory of God would be manifest in the transformed lives of his covenant people and that this book would play at least some small part in that great work.

Questions for Reflection

1. What can happen when homosexuality is viewed exclusively in light of ethics to the exclusion of ministry to individuals?
2. How can one guard against the tendency to view heterosexuality as the solution to homosexuality instead of personal holiness?
3. How has the rapid cultural acceptance of homosexuality impacted the church's perspective on this issue?
4. How does transformed behavior grow out of transformed thinking? (See Rom. 12:2, Eph. 4:23, Col. 3:10.)

PART ONE

The Ethics of Desire

What Is Same-Sex Attraction?

Arriving at biblical clarity on the important issue of same-sex attraction and homosexual orientation requires precision in our use of terms. Some of the disagreement among evangelicals about the sinfulness of homosexual orientation has been a result of people talking past one another and using unclear language. We want to avoid that confusion by clearly defining our terms.

Same-Sex Attraction and Orientation

The most important term is *orientation*. It is crucial to understand the meaning behind this term. Orientation is a newer concept with a very specific and secular genesis. For this reason, we will access the definition of *orientation* used by the American Psychological Association (APA). Our decision to use the APA's definition has some qualifications, however, so we want to make a few comments about the APA and our use of their definition.

First, as Christians committed to Scripture, we confess that our authority is God's Word, which has been inscripturated for us in the books of the Old and New Testaments. No authority, no matter how widely accepted or scientific it is, can eclipse the authority of Scripture in defining the norms of Christian belief and practice. We are not using the APA's definition of *orientation* because we believe its authority eclipses that of the Scriptures.

Second, the APA is a very secular authority. The APA has adopted a secular, unbiblical view, which affirms homosexual behavior. As people committed to the authority of Scripture, we

are profoundly concerned that the APA would embrace a practice that causes so much turmoil and is at odds with human flourishing. We do not use the APA's definition because we embrace their secular and unbiblical worldview. To the contrary, we reject it.

Third, the APA has a habit of changing its positions to fit with shifting cultural views. That is particularly the case with this issue of homosexuality.¹ In other words, what the APA articulates about homosexuality today is not what it has articulated in the past, and is not necessarily what it will articulate in the future. We do not use the APA's definition because it has been—or can be expected to be—a reliable voice on this matter. In fact, we have concerns about its use of the term *orientation*, which we will make clear below.

Fourth, our use of the APA's definition should not imply that we accept sexual orientation as a biblical way of describing human identity. As will be clear below, we believe that sexual-orientation ideology ignores God's revealed purpose in creating us as sexual beings and reduces human identity to the sum total of fallen human desire. Rosaria Butterfield has written powerfully to this point: "Words, like kitchen washrags, carry and distribute history (and bacteria) with each use, and the category invention of sexual orientation brings much bacteria with it. Everyone loses when we define ourselves using categories that God does not."²

With all these concerns, then, why would we access their definition? The reason, quite frankly, is because we need to explain what people commonly mean by the term *sexual orientation*. To that end, we thought it useful to access a definition that is widely accepted by those on all sides of this issue. The APA's definition does indeed reflect what many people believe sexual orientation to be. That is why it is an apt starting point for our biblical evaluation of the concept.

With that in mind, let us consider the APA's definition.

Sexual orientation refers to an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, or both sexes. Sexual orientation also refers to a person's sense of identity based on those attractions, related behaviors, and membership in a community of others who share those attractions.³

According to this established way of speaking, the experience of an orientation is the experience of certain kinds of attractions. A homosexual orientation is comprised of various attractions to persons of the same sex as oneself. There are several different aspects of this definition, which we will unpack below. For now, we can summarize this definition by saying that a person with a homosexual orientation experiences same-sex sexual attractions and same-sex emotional attractions and may choose to identify in community with others who experience these attractions.

Four Approaches to Same-Sex Attraction and Behavior

As we write this book, four different approaches to same-sex attraction and behavior have emerged in the broader “Christian” dialogue on these topics. We place *Christian* in quotes because we are not convinced that all these approaches are faithfully Christian. Still, the persons representing these positions profess a connection with the Christian tradition. Though some of them are clearly not writing in submission to Scripture, it is important to understand their positions and the contributions they are making to the conversation that believers in Jesus are having about these issues. We do not mean to give a comprehensive survey of the literature on this subject. Nor do we wish to imply that these categories never overlap in a given personality.⁴ We are simply trying to sketch the contours of current conversations about homosexuality.

Liberal

The first approach to same-sex attraction and behavior is an approach that compromises Christian faithfulness on the issue. This group professes to be working within the Christian tradition but disavows the biblical teaching on this matter. For its proponents, Scripture is not the *norma normans* of the church's life because the Scripture can be normed by our own experiences and opinions. New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson typifies this approach and has stated in no uncertain terms his repudiation of the Bible's authority:

I have little patience with efforts to make Scripture say something other than what it says, through appeals to linguistic or cultural subtleties. The exegetical situation is straightforward: we know what the text says. But what are we to *do* with what the text says? . . .

I think it important to state clearly that we do, in fact, reject the straightforward commands of Scripture, and appeal instead to another authority when we declare that same-sex unions can be holy and good. And what exactly is that authority? We appeal explicitly to the weight of our own experience and the experience thousands of others have witnessed to, which tells us that to claim our own sexual orientation is in fact to accept the way in which God has created us. By so doing, we explicitly reject as well the premises of the scriptural statements condemning homosexuality—namely, that it is a vice freely chosen, a symptom of human corruption, and disobedience to God's created order.⁵

We have at least one thing in common with Johnson. We, too, have little patience with those who do hermeneutical gymnastics with Scripture in order to obscure or eliminate the Bible's clear

condemnations of homosexual behavior. But where we disagree profoundly is on what we should do with the Scripture's teaching on this matter. Ironically, Johnson and others in this group often interpret the meaning of Scripture in a way similar to those who hold the traditional view. The crucial difference is that this group has no problem saying the Bible is wrong whenever it says that homosexuality is sinful. No Christian embracing the authority and sufficiency of God's Word could ever embrace a view so recklessly dismissive of the sacred Scriptures.

Revisionist

The second approach to same-sex attraction is also one that compromises Christian faithfulness even though it does so a bit differently. Whereas the liberal approach openly opposes the teachings of Scripture, the revisionist attempts to accommodate the Scriptures to the practice of homosexuality. The effort of these revisionists is, therefore, to reinterpret the classic texts of Scripture that teach against homosexuality and to make it seem as though they do not speak to the experience of homosexuals in contemporary culture. One argument says that because the Bible does not address homosexuality as we know it today, the Bible's prohibitions are irrelevant.⁶ This is the view of Matthew Vines in *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships*.

The bottom line is this: The Bible doesn't directly address the issue of same-sex *orientation*—or the expression of that orientation. While its six references to same-sex behavior are negative, the concept of same-sex behavior in the Bible is sexual excess, not sexual orientation.⁷

For Vines, the Bible does not condemn those homosexual practices that are the overflow of loving commitment. The Bible

condemns only displays of homosexual practice that are based on excessive lust. This argument is unpersuasive for reasons that we have articulated elsewhere.⁸ We will say here only that the interpretations offered by Vines and others are an unbiblical and unchristian attempt to revise biblical teaching that two millennia of Christians have found to be clear and compelling. It would be quite something if Christians living in the last four decades had been able to figure something out that everyone else had missed.

Neo-Traditional

The approach of the third group is very different from that of the first two. Many persons adopting a neo-traditional approach are our brothers and sisters in Christ. Even though we ultimately disagree with their understanding of these issues, we are grateful for their desire to think through these matters from the standpoint of Christian faithfulness. Neo-traditionalists embrace the Bible as authoritative and affirm the historical understanding of scriptural teaching about homosexual behavior. Where the neo-traditionalists differ is on the subject of same-sex attraction. This group wants to argue that there is nothing explicitly sinful about a homosexual orientation, *per se*. Many of the writers at the Spiritual Friendship blog represent this view.⁹ Some of the writers there are Roman Catholic,¹⁰ but many of the contributors are Protestant, including New Testament scholar Wesley Hill. Hill has been a winsome and articulate spokesperson for this view, and in an article titled “Is Being Gay Sanctifiable?” he tries to show that there are valuable aspects of being gay. In that article he interacts with the suggestion that all sexual sin, including homosexuality and lesbianism, must be mortified.

My main worry with some of the “renunciation” and “surrender” and “death to self” language that Christians use in

relation to homosexuality is that, for most people, it will end up implying that we believe all aspects of “being gay” are sinful. This is a devastating burden for many same-sex attracted Christians to bear, since it then leaves them trying to parse, ever more minutely and obsessively, how much of their desires for friendship, intimacy, companionship, community, etc. are a result of their sexual orientation. Then, if they think that those desires *are* a result of their same-sex attraction, they’re left feeling that they must repent of things that, surely, God intends for blessing and good in their lives—and things that have a rich history of commendation and sanctification in the history of the Church.¹¹

It is worth noting here that we would agree that same-sex attraction is in a certain sense sanctifiable, and we will argue for that later in this book. When Hill states that it is sanctifiable, however, he means something different than we do. For Hill, to sanctify being gay means to find praiseworthy elements of the orientation and to channel those into good spiritual fruit. Hill explains,

My sexuality, my basic erotic orientation to the world, is inescapably intertwined with how I go about finding and keeping friends. . . . Rather than interpreting my sexuality as a license to go to bed with someone or even to form a monogamous sexual partnership with him, I can harness and guide its energies in the direction of sexually abstinent, yet intimate, friendship. . . . My being gay and saying no to gay sex may lead me to be *more* of a friend to men, not less.¹²

Hill affirms the sinfulness of homosexual behavior but wants to find spiritual benefits to same-sex attraction. We love

Wesley Hill and are thankful for his commitment to Scripture and chastity. We are deeply concerned about his argument, however. Sexual attraction to a person of the same sex is not a platform for spiritual fruit. It is an occasion for repentance. We would take the classic Christian approach that sanctifying homosexual desires means that those desires can be mortified and that new, holy desires can grow in their place (Rom. 8:13). Our burden in this book is to demonstrate that Christians should not give quarter to any vestige of homosexuality, whether behavior or desire.

Traditional

The traditional view is the one we will advocate in this book. Our view is the one of historic Christianity, which sees both homosexual behavior and homosexual desires as sinful. We do not mean to claim that every Christian in the history of the church has articulated things as we have here. We do mean to claim, however, that what we argue in this book is not novel. Our argument has deep roots that can be traced back to the Protestant Reformers, to Augustine, and to the apostle Paul.¹³ We also believe that sinful desires and behaviors can be changed by the power of God's grace in Jesus Christ. We do not mean to imply that same-sex-attracted Christians will be freed from every inclination to sin in this life. Perfectionism is an errant view of sanctification for straight people, and it is no less so for gay people as well. Nevertheless, we do believe that the gospel provides resources for real progress in holiness over the course of a believer's life. That is the biblical norm for all Christians, including ones who experience ongoing struggles with same-sex sexual attraction. The Christian Scriptures are able to interact with, understand, and provide norms for the novel understanding of homosexual orientation that the church is facing today. It is able to do this with the relevance that only its ancient wisdom

can add to this contemporary discussion. More than this, Jesus' powerful resurrection from the grave communicates real power to people struggling with desires that feel hopelessly ingrained.

Evaluating Same-Sex Orientation

So what is sexual orientation? And does the Bible give us any resources for evaluating the concept?¹⁴ As we mentioned above, we are using the APA's definition of sexual orientation as the starting point for our evaluation.

Sexual orientation refers to an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, or both sexes. Sexual orientation also refers to a person's sense of identity based on those attractions, related behaviors, and membership in a community of others who share those attractions.¹⁵

In previous writing on same-sex orientation, we have focused almost entirely on the first part of this definition—sexual attraction. We still believe that focus is justified, because the sexual attraction component is the foundation for everything else in the definition. But still, there are other aspects of the definition that cannot be ignored. The definition includes the emotional/romantic aspects of attraction. The definition also specifies sexual orientation as an identity category. Our evaluation must include these components as well. So we will render a brief evaluation of these three components in the APA's definition of orientation: sexual attraction, emotional/romantic attraction, and identity.

Same-Sex Orientation as Sexual Attraction

Same-sex sexual attraction is the feature that most people connect with having a homosexual orientation. It may be that

same-sex orientation includes more than sexual attraction, but it certainly does not mean less than that.¹⁶ Most writers identify enduring experiences of sexual desire for persons of the same sex as the defining feature of a same-sex orientation. We could multiply examples of this, but one secular instance appears in Simon LeVay's 2011 book *Gay, Straight, and the Reason Why: The Science of Sexual Orientation*. He writes,

Sexual orientation has to do with the sex of our preferred sex partners. More specifically, it is the trait that predisposes us to experience sexual attraction to people of the same sex as ourselves (*homosexual, gay, or lesbian*), to persons of the other sex (*heterosexual or straight*), or to both sexes (*bisexual*).¹⁷

Notice that the central element in this definition is the direction of a person's sexual attractions. The author goes on to list other, non-sexual elements of attraction. Nevertheless, the defining feature is the sexual one. Those who have an enduring experience of sexual desire for persons of the same sex are said to have a homosexual orientation. Edward Stein also writes from a secular perspective and contends that "sexual orientation has to do with a person's sexual desires and the sexual activities in which he or she is disposed to engage."¹⁸

Writing from a Christian point of view, Mark Yarhouse and Erica Tan likewise define orientation in terms of sexual desire.

When we discuss *sexual orientation* . . . we are referring to what is often thought to be a more enduring pattern of attraction to another based on one's sexual desire. . . . Orientation is often discussed in our cultural context as heterosexual (sexual desire as attraction to the opposite sex), homosexual (to the same sex) and bisexual (to both sexes).¹⁹

This is the common way that the terms are used—sexual orientation is defined by the direction of one’s sexual desire over time.²⁰

We will argue that, because the Bible speaks clearly about our sexual desires and attractions, it also renders a clear word about this defining element of sexual orientation. We can put this in practical terms with respect to homosexuality. When individuals feel themselves experiencing an attraction or a desire toward a person of the same sex, the Bible is clear about their responsibility before God at that point. In the next chapter, we will show that Jesus teaches that it is always sinful to desire something that God forbids (Matt. 5:27–28). The very experience of the desire becomes an occasion for repentance. And it is pastoral malpractice to tell someone who is feeling a sexual attraction for a person of the same sex that there is no need to repent. In the moment when the feeling of sexual desire is aroused in such a way—in that moment—that person must confess the desire as sinful and turn from it. A person is not absolved of an immoral sexual desire simply because it seems to follow an enduring pattern—i.e., an orientation. The enduring nature of same-sex desire is an indication not that God approves such desire but that we are intractably sinful apart from grace. It is on these terms that John and Paul Feinberg render this verdict on sexual orientation: “We stand firmly committed to the position that Scripture teaches that homosexual and lesbian orientation and behavior are contrary to the order for human sexuality God placed in creation. Hence they are sinful.”²¹

A common objection to the foregoing goes like this: “If a person cannot control whether he has same-sex attraction, how can that attraction be considered sinful?” This objection bases moral accountability upon whether one has the ability to choose his proclivities. But this is not how the Bible speaks of sin and judgment. There are all manner of predispositions that we are

born with and that we experience as unchosen realities.²² Nevertheless, the Bible characterizes such realities as sin: pride, anger, anxiety, just to name a few. Why would we put same-sex attraction in a different category from those other predispositions that we groan to be delivered from and that we are called to repent of? Jesus says that all such sins proceed from the heart and that we are therefore morally accountable for them (Mark 7:21). And this assessment is in no way mitigated by the possibility that we come by it naturally. Whether same-sex attraction derives from nature or from nurture (or both) is not strictly relevant to our moral evaluation of the *fact* of homosexual attraction.²³ As Richard Hays writes,

The Bible's sober anthropology rejects the apparently commonsense assumption that only freely chosen acts are morally culpable. Quite the reverse: the very nature of sin is that it is *not* freely chosen. That is what it means to live "in the flesh" in a fallen creation. 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.²⁴

Hays is correct. The issue really isn't a new one. At the end of the day, our moral assessment of sexual attraction forces us back onto terrain that has been well traversed by theologians over the past twenty centuries. The matter really does come down to one's anthropology.

If you view human nature as a blank slate, and if you reduce sin to one's behavior—that which one chooses to do—then you are going to assess the morality of same-sex sexual attraction in a certain way. If, however, you regard the human condition

as fundamentally flawed—that we are sinful not only in our choices but also in our nature—then you are going to approach the matter in a different way. And that difference goes back at least as far as Augustine and Pelagius. And the evangelical tradition—especially in its Reformed expressions—has sided definitively with Augustine.

We will show in the next chapter that our moral assessment of homosexuality does not depend upon its being chosen. All sinful desire springs spontaneously from our nature, but even if it is something unchosen, that does not make it any less sinful. To that end, Charles Hodge contends that our pre-behavioral dispositions—which are often unchosen—have a moral character to them. This view of the matter stands squarely in opposition to “Pelagian and Rationalistic Doctrine.” He writes,

We do attribute moral character to principles which precede all voluntary action and which are entirely independent of the power of the will. . . . We hold ourselves responsible not only for the deliberate acts of the will, that is, for acts of deliberate self-determination, which suppose both knowledge and volition, but also for emotional, impulsive acts, which precede all deliberation; and not only for such impulsive acts, but also for the principles, dispositions, or immanent states of the mind, by which its acts whether impulsive or deliberate, are determined. When a man is convinced of sin, it is not so much for specific acts of transgression that his conscience condemns him, as for the permanent states of his mind; his selfishness, worldliness, and maliciousness; his ingratitude, unbelief, and hardness of heart; his want of right affections, of love to God, of zeal for the Redeemer, and of benevolence towards men. These are not acts. They are not states of mind under control of the will; and yet in

the judgment of conscience, which we cannot silence or pervert, they constitute our character and are just ground of condemnation.²⁵

Hodge doesn't leave it there. He makes a scriptural argument for this view and concludes, "The denial, therefore, that dispositions or principles as distinguished from acts, can have a moral character, subverts some of the most plainly revealed doctrines of the sacred Scriptures."²⁶ The key doctrine he has in mind is the doctrine of original sin. On this point, Hodge writes,

All Christian churches receive the doctrines of original sin and regeneration in a form which involves not only the principle that dispositions, as distinguished from acts, may have a moral character, but also that such character belongs to them whether they be innate, acquired, or infused. It is, therefore, most unreasonable to assume the ground that a man can be responsible only for his voluntary acts, or for their subjective effects, when our own consciousness, the universal judgment of men, the word of God, and the Church universal, so distinctly assert the contrary.²⁷

Hodge's key point is this: we are sinners by nature and by choice. At the most fundamental level, in fact, our nature produces our choices.²⁸ We inherit a sinful nature from our father Adam so that we are spring-loaded to sin.²⁹ And that is not merely a word for people experiencing same-sex attraction. That is a word for all of us. Same-sex attraction is merely one variety of fallenness. But it is not the only one. We are all fallen and are in this predicament together.

Hodge's account of sin and of the nature of man is not an outlier. It represents the mainstream of evangelical—and especially

Reformed—anthropology.³⁰ The Reformed tradition elaborated Augustine’s view on this point and specified that original sin means that all humanity inherits both Adam’s guilt and his sinful nature. Inheriting Adam’s sinful nature means that every person is born into a state of total depravity that can be remedied only by the redemption found in Christ. That depravity manifests itself in a heart that is naturally and sinfully at odds with God and his law. The Christian is someone whose nature has been renewed by the Holy Spirit and who is no longer in bondage to indwelling sin. Nevertheless, even the Christian has to wrestle against a sinful nature that is not completely eradicated until the resurrection of the body. This means that our experience of sinful desire/attraction is often involuntary and unchosen, arising spontaneously from our sinful nature.

We believe this evangelical anthropology to be the scriptural position. Modern attempts to remove same-sex sexual attraction—or even same-sex orientation—from this biblical framework are doomed to failure. They produce a superficial understanding of sin and of the human condition, and they hinder people from perceiving their need for the transformation that Jesus provides.

Same-Sex Orientation as Emotional and Romantic Attraction

What are we to make of emotional and romantic components of attraction to the same sex? Are they sinful in the same way that the desire for homosexual sex is sinful? Some writers claim that they are not and that the non-sexual components of same-sex attraction can be holy and pleasing to God. Wesley Hill, for example, argues that same-sex attraction cannot be reduced to a desire for same-sex genital contact.³¹ He argues that same-sex attraction also includes a desire for same-sex friendship and even

a “preference” for same-sex companionship.³² We do not deny that same-sex-attracted persons report heightened emotional connections with persons of the same sex and that they perceive those connections as part of their attractions. Nevertheless, the defining element of same-sex attraction is desire for a sexual relationship with someone of the same sex. When same-sex sexual desire is removed from the equation, then we are no longer talking about same-sex attraction—at least not in the sense that modern people mean the term. When modern people talk about same-sex attraction, they intend a kind of attraction that includes sexual possibility between persons of the same sex. They do not mean to label as *gay* every person capable of emotional bonds with a person of the same sex. It is the same-sex sexual desire that is the constitutive element.

One might find parallels between the non-sexual bonds of a gay couple and the non-sexual bonds of straight same-sex friends. But even though there are parallels, there is a crucial distinction. The bonds of affection between straight friends do not contain within them sexual possibility. In cases where such erotic possibilities are not present, we are simply not talking about what the APA means by *homosexual orientation*. The bonds of affection between David and Jonathan or Jesus and John, for example, did not contain sexual possibility. The same is not true of the bonds of affection between gay couples. In fact, those bonds are defined in part *by* their sexual possibility. To the degree that same-sex bonds are defined by sexual possibility and intention, they are sinful.

What, then, are we to make of the emotional bonds that gay people experience for persons of the same sex? Can those attractions be sanctified?³³ Yes, they can. They can be sanctified when they are shorn of the elements that otherwise make them sinful. When sexual possibility and intention are removed

through repentance and faith toward God, there can exist the real bonds of holy, God-honoring same-sex friendship. But those bonds can be cultivated only when we recognize that the desire for sinful sex can never be the foundation for holy friendships. Holy friendships are the fruit of chastity in both thought and deed. All Christians should desire to have close same-sex relationships. We should not tarnish the sanctity of these same-sex friendships by locating them on a continuum with homosexuality—a category that has always been understood as one at odds with chastity.³⁴ Same-sex-attracted people can have holy friendships with persons of the same sex. When they do, desire for homosexual sex has been overcome, and the remaining bonds of affection can in no sense be labeled homosexual, gay, or same-sex attracted.

Same-Sex Orientation as Identity

The APA's definition also speaks of same-sex orientation as a "person's sense of identity." That identity is based squarely on same-sex sexual attraction and on membership in a community that shares those attractions. How do we evaluate sexual orientation in terms of identity?

We should note that even though the APA's clinical definition speaks of sexual orientation as identity, that concept has been vigorously contested by queer theorists. For example, Hanne Blank argues in her book *Straight: The Surprisingly Short History of Heterosexuality* that the terms *heterosexual* and *homosexual* are "neologisms" of the modern era. She writes, "These terms came to exist because a need was perceived to identify people as representatives of generic types distinguished on the basis of their tendencies to behave sexually in particular ways."³⁵ In this sense neither homosexuality nor heterosexuality are fixed identity markers. Rather, they are socially constructed terms, and people's sexual proclivities are in actuality more variable

than we have been led to believe.³⁶ It is ironic that, just as many evangelicals are coming to embrace the notion of sexual orientation, queer theorists are rejecting it as a fixed identity marker.

But it is not just queer theorists who are destabilizing the concept of orientation as identity. In an important 2014 article in *First Things*, Michael Hannon contends that the concept of sexual orientation as identity actually undermines the teleological tradition of Christian sexual ethics. In other words, he argues that over the last 150 years the West has allowed “sexual orientations” to replace the “teleological tradition with a brand new creation.”³⁷ Under the new regime, a person’s identity would no longer be conceived in terms of a Creator’s purpose but in terms of one’s personal sense of attraction to either or both sexes. In this way the natural law tradition has given way to “psychiatric normality” and has paved the way for a new sexual ethic based on sexual orientation identities.³⁸ Hannon thus concludes, “The role of Christian chastity today, I argue, is to dissociate the Church from the false absolutism of identity based upon erotic tendency.”³⁹ In short: in God’s world, we are who God says we are. We are not merely the sum total of our fallen sexual desires.

For these reasons, same-sex orientation as an identity category is problematic. From a Christian perspective, it invites us to embrace fictional identities that go directly against God’s revealed purposes for his creation. It invites us to define ourselves and the meaning of our lives according to the sum total of our fallen sexual attractions. A Christian approach to these realities is very different. Sam Allberry’s description of his own experience with same-sex attraction is very helpful.

The kind of sexual attractions I experience are not fundamental to my identity. They are part of *what I feel* but are not *who I am* in a fundamental sense. I am far more than

my sexuality. . . . Desires for things God has forbidden are a reflection of how sin has distorted me, not how God has made me.⁴⁰

God's purposes for us are obscured if we make our sinful sexual attractions the touchstone of our being. God gives us a bodily identity that indicates his purposes for us sexually, and those purposes are unambiguously ordered to the opposite sex within the covenant of marriage. To embrace an identity that goes against God's revealed purpose is by definition sinful.⁴¹ It is for this reason that Rosaria Butterfield warns Christians that sexual orientation ideology is at odds with a Christian view of the human person. On this point, it is worth quoting her at length.

There is no ontological category of sexual orientation. The idea of identity emerging from sexual desire embodies a philosophy of the soul that is false. . . . Christians who feel beholden by culture to use the concept of sexual orientation ought to stop and ask one question: where ought we to situate sexual orientation in relation to biblical principles? If we were to fish around for a biblical place to contain this neologism (which is sloppy theology at best), it could only be traced to the biblical concept of "flesh."⁴²

We agree with Butterfield on this crucial point. Accepting sexual orientation as an identity-defining element of the human condition is foreign to Scripture—except as a feature of human sinfulness. For this reason, the term *orientation* may be altogether irredeemable for Christians trying to communicate biblical truth about how God has created us as bearers of his image. When Christians use terms like "gay Christian" to describe believers who experience same-sex attraction, they are speaking in a way

that is at best misleading and at worst a complete surrender to the falsehoods of the sexual revolution. We are not to define ourselves as the sum total of fallen sexual desire. We are to define ourselves according to the purposes that God has revealed in his word.

When we say that ours is the traditional view grounded in classical Christianity, we mean that ours is the biblically consistent way to apply a Christian understanding of human sinfulness and human nature to this contemporary discussion of homosexual desires and behavior. We want to demonstrate that this is the case in the pages that follow.

Questions for Reflection

1. According to each of the four approaches to same-sex attraction and behavior, what authority does the Bible have in addressing this subject?
2. Is the sinfulness of our sexual attractions dependent on whether or not we choose them?
3. How does understanding the different aspects of sexual orientation (sexual attraction, emotional and romantic attraction, and identity) help when we are ministering to people with same-sex attraction?