

HOLY SEXUALITY AND THE GOSPEL

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HOLY SEXUALITY AND THE GOSPEL

Sex, Desire, and Relationships
Shaped by God's Grand Story

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circumstance, this would have resulted in a stern rebuke. However, in this case, they actually celebrated what was deemed to be a sign of "success." Like the mother with the gay son, a faulty framework and inaccurate foundation leads to an incorrect conclusion—and in this case, even the celebration and normalization of sin.

So how do I best help someone who desires to marry? Point that person to Christ. Help him be a more godly man. Help her be a more godly woman. The key to a successful marriage is not sexual desires but union with Christ. And even with heterosexual feelings, an individual must continue to resist sinful temptations.

Heterosexuality will not get you into heaven and is not the ultimate goal for those with same-sex attractions. God commands us to "be holy, for I am holy" (Leviticus 11:44–45; 19:2; 20:7; 1 Peter 1:16). Because God is holy, he requires his people to be holy as well.

Thus, the biblical opposite of homosexuality is not heterosexuality—that's not the ultimate goal. But the opposite of homosexuality is holiness. As a matter of fact, the opposite of any sin struggle is holiness!

From God's Word, we see that sexual expression isn't all bad or dirty. It's God's good gift to a husband and a wife to enjoy within the context of marriage. Any sex outside this is not God's will. However, by allowing the orientation paradigm of heterosexuality, bisexuality, and homosexuality to frame the conversation, we're incapable of precisely communicating the correct, biblical modes for sexual expression.

Godly marriage and godly singleness are two sides of the same coin. We should stop emphasizing only one without the other. Both are good. Holy sexuality—chastity in singleness and faithfulness in marriage—is God's good standard for *everyone*.

THE TEMPTATIONS

Addressing Same-Sex Attractions

Same-sex sexual expression is sinful, but what about same-sex attractions? As a new Christian, I had defined attraction to be equivalent to temptation. Therefore, I believed that all same-sex attractions were *not* sinful—because temptations were *not* sinful. However, I realized not everyone defined attraction the same.

Does attraction mean temptation? Does attraction mean desire? Does attraction mean lust? Or is it a combination of these? This is where confusion arises. If we can't even define attraction, how can we assert whether it's sinful or not? *Sin* is a word found throughout the Bible. However, the word *attraction* is not. Instead, the biblical writers use other similar terms like *temptation*, *desire*, *covet*, and *lust*.

To avoid further confusion, I'm not going to consider whether same-sex attractions are sinful; instead we'll examine whether same-sex temptations are sinful and whether same-sex desires are sinful. In this chapter we'll first discuss the concept of temptation, and in the following chapter we'll discuss the concepts of desire, covet, and lust.

Tempted in Every Respect

The reality of temptation is found throughout the pages of God's grand story. In Genesis 3, the cunning serpent successfully tempted Adam and

Eve to rebel against God. In the New Testament, we see Satan tempting Jesus in the wilderness. But unlike the first Adam, the second Adam obeyed God perfectly, fully doing the will of God (Matthew 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–13).

The writer of Hebrews speaks of the real temptations in the life of Jesus: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). Here in this verse, "our weaknesses" refers to our moral frailty and propensity to sin.¹

Yet Jesus's sympathy for our weaknesses goes beyond a mere theoretical understanding. He offers actual assistance when we're tempted. "For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted" (Hebrews 2:18). The Son of God's sympathy derives from his full participation in humanity and his exposure to the same experiences as the rest of us.

But this doesn't mean Jesus needed to sin in order to sympathize. As the apostle John writes, "You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and *in him there is no sin*" (1 John 3:5, emphasis added). As God, Jesus did not sin and in fact is incapable of sinning (this is called *impeccability*). Therefore, the temptations of Jesus were not sinful. But then how can he sympathize with our temptations?

Jesus's inability to sin does not diminish in any way the reality of his real and intense struggle with temptation. In fact, his sinlessness in the midst of temptation makes him the ultimate example of struggling—because he never succumbed. Nineteenth-century British theologian B. F. Westcott provides the most lucid explanation of Christ's sympathy:

The power of sympathy lies not in the mere capacity for feeling, but in the lessons of experience. And again, sympathy with the sinner in his trial does not depend on the experience of sin but

on the experience of the strength of the temptation to sin which only the sinless can know in its full intensity. He who falls yields before the last strain.²

Jesus struggled with temptation infinitely more than any sinful man or woman, yet he was victorious. The Son of Man was tempted in every respect; he *fully* and *perfectly* struggled, bringing his endurance to completion. This should be an extraordinary encouragement for all—particularly those of us who struggle with same-sex attractions.

Yes, our Lord has struggled much *more* than we have. As a matter of fact, because we give in and yield to temptation and sin, we comprehend the struggle only in part. Jesus alone has struggled *wholly*, as he withstood heroically to the end. What an amazing Savior and friend we have in Jesus!

A Way of Escape

Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 10 of the tragic example of the Israelites in the wilderness and sternly warns us to flee idolatry and sexual immorality. In the midst of these strong words, he also provides an encouraging and empowering promise: "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it" (verse 13).

The Greek verb *peirazo* can be translated as "try, test, trap, or tempt."³ The difference between a test and a temptation lies in the motivation of the tester. For example, God can allow believers to face a trial to test and sharpen their character (John 6:6). On the other hand, Satan tempts people to sin and disobey God (1 Corinthians 7:5).

A test or temptation can build us up or tear us down. Puritan John

Owen explains it best: "Temptation is like a knife, that may either cut the meat or the throat of a man; it may be his food or his poison, his exercise or his destruction."⁴

Sometimes it's obvious whether the test or temptation arises from God, from Satan, from another, or from within. Yet in other instances, the word *peirazo* can generally refer to both test and temptation without excluding either—as it does in 1 Corinthians 10:13.⁵

Paul is reminding us that our trials and temptations aren't exceptional, unique, or even unbearable. Satan wants us to think that no one else can understand our struggles. This is a lie. One of the devil's best weapons is isolation. The truth is that we're *never* alone in our fight.

The comfort of Paul's message in this verse finds its source in three words: "God is faithful." Our confidence in the midst of temptation lies not in our own finite abilities but in a faithful and powerful God who never encounters anything he cannot resolve. God provides assurance that each temptation will be in proportion to the capability of the tempted, along with the promise of a "way of escape."

Please catch what Paul is saying here! Superhuman capacity or even great faith is *not* required to endure temptation. Even the weakest of believers has an escape hatch. This is a comforting salve for the feeble and even for those with little faith. Every temptation always falls within the ability of the one tempted to persevere. The true test may not be in our *ability* to endure temptation but in the depth of our *belief* in the sovereignty of almighty God.

Unfortunately, a serious fallacy runs rampant in our churches that a good Christian is somehow immune to temptation. This simply isn't accurate. Scripture doesn't promise that faith in Jesus results in an eradication of temptations. If Jesus himself was tempted, what makes us think we won't be? The Christian life doesn't mean you won't be tempted; it means you'll have the Spirit-wrought ability to be holy even in the midst

of temptations. What matters most is not that we are tempted but how we respond to temptation.

If you're wracked with guilt for simply having same-sex sexual temptations, hear these words from John Owen: "It is impossible that we should be so freed from temptation as not to be at all tempted."⁶ Being tempted doesn't mean you have little faith because it's quite ordinary and human to be tempted. The truth of the matter is that temptations are *not* sinful.

However, we must be careful not to take temptation lightly. It is not sin *per se*, but it also isn't benign, as it quickly leads to sin. Therefore, we should always be vigilant in our response to it. *No* temptation to sin is trivial or inconsequential, and that's indeed true for same-sex temptations.

James provides a sober warning that temptation is tantalizing: "Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death" (James 1:14–15). Although this is not meant to be a step-by-step timeline for sin and temptation, in verse 13 James explains that God does not tempt us to sin and warns us that temptation leads to sin, which leads to death.

There is nothing innocent or sanctifiable about same-sex temptations. They are a stark reality of the distorting effects of original sin. And everyone's sexuality has been distorted by the Fall. Therefore, resisting, fighting, and fleeing temptations must be a vital and normal aspect of a mature Christian's life.

The heart of the matter is not whether we're tempted but how we respond. Do we resist temptation, or do we allow it to turn into sin? It's not a matter of *if* we're tempted but *when*.

But rest assured: Jesus is able to sympathize and help. And God is faithful, apportioning temptation according to our ability to resist while always providing a way out. In our struggles, we are *never* alone.

ANATOMY OF DESIRE

Seeing the End from the Beginning

While in Bible college and seminary, I read about some of the notable church fathers. One especially stood out to me because of his unique conversion story. As a young man, Augustine of Hippo (AD 354–430) was fueled by his carnal desires and lived a life of hedonism and sexual immorality. But God heard the patient and persistent prayers of his devout Christian mother, Monica. It's fascinating how similar my conversion was to his.

Although Augustine rejected the faith in which he was raised and held to various pagan philosophies, he began listening to the sermons of Ambrose, the bishop of Milan. This only added to the mental and emotional strain from battling his fleshly desires. One day in his garden, Augustine was in bitter turmoil and cried out to God, "O Lord, how long?"¹

As he wept, he heard a child's voice from a neighboring house: "Take up and read." On a nearby table lay some of Paul's epistles that Augustine had been reading, so he picked up and read the nearest text at hand:

Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. (Romans 13:13–14)

Augustine later wrote that he immediately felt serenity in his heart after reading these verses. The power of the Word of God penetrated his hardened heart in a remarkable way and brought about a radical transformation. Because of its impact on Augustine, I have put this passage on my bathroom mirror and read it every morning in preparation for my day.

Desire is a key concept in Augustine's writings. We are all created to desire God as our highest good. But because of the corruption of original sin, the object of our desire has shifted away from God. Thus, we now desire what is created rather than the Creator (Romans 1:25). Augustine articulates this best in his famous prayer, "You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You."²

Some church fathers seem to conflate human desires with sexual desires. But as we know, not all desire is sexual. In the same way, we shouldn't reduce same-sex desires to eroticism. As a matter of fact, sex is often of minor significance in lesbian relationships and intense romantic desires are the norm.

Yet, while sexuality does consist of *more* than sexual attractions, it definitely is not any *less*. The question is, How much more? Should sexuality be so broadly defined as an affective capacity for relationship to include even a pure, platonic desire for friendship?³ Should it also include admiration of beauty, as in an aesthetic orientation?⁴ If we take these suggestions and widen the meaning of same-sex attractions to this extent, then we've just obliterated the distinction between opposite-sex and same-sex desires. And as a result, everyone now has same-sex attractions!

But if we should not broaden the meaning that far, what types of desires do constitute sexuality? Can we say that same-sex desires in general are *not* sinful? Or maybe more importantly, how do we discern between good desire and bad desire? Is it too burdensome to constantly have to parse out these desires? And ultimately, how are our desires shaped by God's grand story?

Every one of us experiences desires. It may be one of the most intimate and personal realities in our daily lives. Our conclusions regarding the above questions are of great importance and relevance to every Christian. Therefore, let's again look to Scripture for the answers.

Desire in God's Word

In some religious systems, the absence of desire is the ideal state of human existence. However, the Bible communicates no such thing—desire in itself is not bad. We can find several examples of good desire in Scripture.

To start off, God has desires, and all his desires are most certainly good. God declares, "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings" (Hosea 6:6). God also "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4). As Jesus intercedes for future believers, he says, "Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am" (John 17:24). God's desires are always good, but what about human desires?

It's no surprise that redeemed men and women created in the image of God can have correctly ordered desires as well. The psalmist writes, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you" (Psalm 73:25). In Philippians 1:23, Paul says, "My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better." Paul also speaks of his "heart's desire and prayer to God" for the salvation of his fellow Jews (Romans 10:1). Augustine says this about good desires: "The whole life of a good Christian is an holy desire."⁵

But more often in Scripture, the concept of desire is presented negatively, not positively. In Genesis 3:6, desire is a key aspect of the Fall: "When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a

delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate."

In Exodus 20:17, God delivers the last of the Ten Commandments: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's."

The Hebrew word *chamad*, rendered in this verse as "covet," can also be translated as "desire." Similarly in the Greek New Testament, the words *epithymeo* and *epithymia* can be rendered as "covet" or "lust" as well as "desire." In biblical terminology, lust and desire are not distinct categories. Desire doesn't *turn* into lust as many incorrectly assume, but wrongly ordered desire *is* lust.

How then do we differentiate between right and wrong desires?

The End of Desire

The moral value of any desire is determined by whether its "end" transgresses or conforms to God's standard. In fact, all desire is *teleological*.⁶ The Greek word *telos* means "end, goal, or purpose." Thus, every desire has an end, goal, or purpose. Without an end, a desire simply wouldn't be desire.

Not only is every desire about *something*—tangible or intangible, but also every desire has an envisioned *purpose* or *action*. Old Testament scholar Brevard Childs explains that in Hebrew, desire is "an emotion which often leads to a commensurate action."⁷ For us to evaluate desire, we must discern its end, purpose, or goal.

In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve desired to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—an action clearly forbidden by God. What made their desire wrong was not the *object*—the fruit, which in

itself was good—but the *intended action* of their desire. If the end is sinful, then the desire is sinful as well.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches if the intended action is sinful, then the desire is sinful too. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:27–28).

Jesus tethers the sinful sexual *act* of the seventh commandment (“You shall not commit adultery”) to the sinful sexual *desire* of the tenth commandment (“You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife”).⁸ In other words, it’s wrong to say that only the *act* of illicit sex is sin; its *desire* is sinful as well.

Obviously, adultery and lust aren’t exactly the same, just as murder and hate aren’t the same. But the Son of God is making a provocative point: actual sin isn’t birthed in innocence. Jesus condemns the desire to sin—which many mistakenly view as harmless—to be just as sinful as the egregious act. The only sexual revolution Jesus advocates is one that raises the bar on sexual purity and warns that sinful sexual desire is not something to toy with or treat trivially.

To be clear, sexual desire isn’t bad in itself and can be good. It all depends on whether its *end* aligns with God’s will. For example, in the wedding celebrated in the Song of Solomon, the bride exults, “I am my beloved’s, and his desire is for me” (7:10). This mutual delight is both blessed and celebrated by God. However, the bride’s desires before marriage needed to be restrained, as the bride herself affirms: “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem . . . that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases” (2:7; 3:5).

So what does all this tell us about the moral value of same-sex desire? Is it good or sinful?

The Most Common of Affections

First, we need to delineate different types of same-sex desire. How? By looking at its end. The end of same-sex *sexual* desire is sexual intimacy between two men or two women—which is sinful behavior. If the end is wrong, then the desire is wrong. Thus, same-sex sexual desire *per se* is sinful.

However, not all same-sex desire is sexual or erotic. There’s also non-erotic same-sex desire. It’s obvious that longings to form deep, nonerotic, *platonic* bonds of friendship with other members of the same sex are certainly blessed by God. Yet we shouldn’t equate such platonic desires with sexually related desires. The God-given reality is that everyone desires healthy, nonsexual, same-sex friendships.

If a purely platonic desire for friendship, intimacy, companionship, and community were a part of one’s “sexual orientation,” then *everyone* would be “gay.” Conflating platonic desires with sexual desires blurs the boundaries and ultimately makes the concept of same-sex attraction meaningless. Even gay neuroscientist Simon LeVay considers platonic desires for friendship to be an unreliable criterion for sexual orientation.⁹

If sexuality includes platonic desires, then this implies that same-sex attracted individuals are inherently *better* at making same-sex friends than those with opposite-sex attractions. This is altogether not true. Simply put, platonic desires for friendship are not exclusive to or even stronger in those with same-sex attractions. These are affections common to everyone.

Awakening Romance

Another familiar mistake is the failure to recognize that some same-sex desires, although nonsexual, are nevertheless *romantic*, not platonic.

Romantic desires and platonic desires are not equivalent. It's crucial to distinguish between them because the end of romantic same-sex desire is not God's will.

Merriam-Webster defines *platonic* as "a relationship marked by the absence of romance or sex."¹⁰ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *romance* as "ardour or warmth of feeling in a love affair; love, esp. of an idealized or sentimental kind."¹¹ Nonsexual romantic desires are essentially yearning to become *one* with and be permanently and exclusively united to someone we hold dear.

While lacking eroticism, when these romantic affections are toward a person in which a biblical covenantal union cannot occur, they are still wrong. Romance and love aren't synonymous. While friendship, kinship, and marriage are all contexts in which to experience love, there isn't one better or worse, greater or less than the other. Yet, Scripture only refers to marriage as becoming one—friendship isn't meant to replace marriage.

Some argue that it's an unbearable burden for same-sex-attracted individuals to constantly have to parse out which nonsexual desires are platonic (permissible) and which are romantic (not permissible). But spotting romantic desires isn't as hard as some make it. Romance is present when your heart races when you think about him. Throughout the day, you ponder, *Does she miss me right now?* Your thoughts are fixated on planning out details of what you'll do next with him. You're jealous when she shows more interest in another. You get lost in his eyes. Her touch sends chills up your spine. You want him completely to yourself. You cry for days when the relationship changes or ends.

Every single desire we have must be put to the test. What is its end, goal, or purpose? If you're biblically married and your romantic desires are for your spouse, those desires are good and blessed. If you're single and have romantic desires for someone of the opposite sex who is a potential spouse in biblical marriage, then those romantic desires are permissible.

All other romantic desires are improper and should not be allowed to grow or flourish. That's true for everyone—male or female, opposite-sex attracted or same-sex attracted.

Many end up in much pain when they naively allow their hearts to open to romantic desires when no God-honoring end is in sight. Unfortunately, these desires can so easily push people toward sinful behavior and, ultimately, away from Christ. John Piper wisely notes that "Christianity is war. It is a declaration of all-out combat against our own sinful impulses."¹² This truth applies to every believer—especially the individual entertaining same-sex romance.

What might seem like a simple confusion or conflation of desires can lead to sin. Same-sex romantic desires are not innocuous or innocent. Many same-sex-attracted individuals have allowed their romantic "crushes" and desires for their friends of the same sex to swell and intensify unchecked. This unguarded carelessness has led to unhealthy co-dependency, relational idolatry, sinful fantasies, sexual immorality, intense emotional distress, one-sided heartbreaks, severe depression, and even suicidality.

This may seem like a lot of restrictions on desires—namely, that same-sex romantic and erotic desires should not be celebrated and thus should be curbed. Does this then mean a life of isolation and loneliness for the individual with same-sex attractions and a constant fear that a regular friendship can turn romantic? As Christians, while guarding against sinful sexual and romantic desires, we are called to strengthen and deepen the bonds of relational intimacy within the context of the family of God, the church.

The church is the true and eternal family in which real, lasting, and genuine relationships should blossom and grow. I will discuss this concept of spiritual family further in a following chapter. But let us flee desires that draw us away from God and wholeheartedly chase after Christ

and his bride with a profound desire to deepen brotherly, sisterly, platonic intimacy within the family of God.

Still, some believe that same-sex romantic desires aren't sinful because opposite-sex romantic desires are permissible. But these two scenarios aren't analogous. For two unmarried people of the opposite sex, a romantic relationship with careful restraint can culminate in a union blessed by God. But a same-sex romantic relationship can never culminate in a union blessed by God.

A more fitting analogy would be a married man in a romantic relationship with a woman who is not his wife. Regardless of the fact that they're *not* having sex, their romance is sinful. And in line with Jesus's words in Matthew 5:27–28, if the end is wrong (action) and the lust is wrong (desire), then everything in between is wrong as well (including romance). Romantic same-sex desires are not to be toyed with but should be resisted and mortified.

Actually, *every* Christian—whether experiencing opposite-sex attractions or same-sex attractions—should continuously and carefully parse and evaluate personal desires. Vigilance is a sign of spiritual maturity. A sinful act never comes out of nowhere but is birthed in the crevices of our hearts and minds, the seedbed of our desires. We must diligently learn the intentions and limits of our desires to know which to embrace (such as platonic same-sex desires) and which to resist (romantic and erotic same-sex desires).

Sexual expression is judged by the benchmark of holiness, a standard that isn't based on the heterosexual versus homosexual paradigm. Likewise, holy sexuality—faithfulness in marriage and chastity in singleness—is the only correct end for desire.

“SEXUAL ORIENTATION”

Blind Acceptance or Critical Assessment?

One of the things lacking today is a robust theological discussion on sexual orientation. This broadly used term, which some believe describes not only *how* we are but also *who* we are, definitely requires more in-depth analysis and evaluation. Should we simply accept this as a reality, as the only terminology to describe enduring same-sex attractions? Or should we step back and critically assess this idea in light of God's grand story—creation, fall, redemption, and consummation?

The modern concept of sexual orientation originates from the discipline of psychology, and often Christian discussions are built more around this social scientific framework than around a biblical one. It's important to recognize that this notion is rooted in a secular understanding of anthropology, which rejects or at least diminishes the reality of original sin.¹ In today's world of infinite shades of gray, sloppy ambiguity on biblical sexuality is essentially flirting with heresy.

For example, the idea that same-sex sexual orientation is only a disability (that is, a natural consequence of the Fall, like deafness) and not a moral consequence is dangerously close to Pelagianism, a denial of original sin. A naturally occurring disease or disability has no *direct* correlation to sinful behavior, while same-sex sexual orientation does. Remember

that the doctrine of original sin is a key aspect to understanding same-sex sexual expression, desires, and temptations.

Gay activists carelessly brush off the Bible with the assumption that God's Word has nothing to say about "sexual orientation."² After all, they assert, this term or concept doesn't appear anywhere in the pages of the Bible. This strict and narrow understanding would not allow us to develop any biblical ethic or theology for today. Just because a term or concept isn't found in Scripture doesn't mean the Bible has nothing to say about it.

Our solution begins by looking to Scripture with an eye on creation, fall, redemption, and consummation—just as we did with holy sexuality. Secular categories don't always fit into biblical ones. Often there isn't an exactly equivalent paradigm, which requires us to assess the category and consider recategorizing. If we're able to reframe around a biblical framework, this will often bring more clarity and dispel confusion.

To begin, we must define *sexual orientation*. Regrettably, this crucial first step is frequently disregarded, but constructive dialogue can't occur without it. Many talk about sexual orientation, but few can explain precisely what it is. The American Psychological Association provides this explanation:

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

It's nearly impossible to disassociate sexual orientation from personal identity. This definition from the American Psychological Association clearly links the two. In previous chapters, we've already exposed the

problems of fusing sexuality with identity and the error of making desire who we are.

From the definition above, we also see that orientation has a sociological aspect. That is, identifying oneself as a "gay Christian" implies that one identifies as much with the gay community as with the Christian community, if not more. Should Christ's body be placed at the same level with any demographic? This is one reason I never identify as a Chinese Christian or even a male Christian.

The above definition also describes *orientation* as "an enduring pattern" of attractions. Although attractions are part of this definition, we must not confuse orientation with them. "Enduring" communicates that these desires are persistent and don't readily go away. The American Psychological Association has stated that these attractions are generally not chosen.⁴ But what exactly does "pattern" mean? Let's look at other definitions for more clarity.

In 2006 several international human rights activists produced the Yogyakarta Principles that defined *sexual orientation* as a "capacity for profound emotional, affectional and sexual attraction."⁵ In his book *Gay, Straight, and the Reason Why: The Science of Sexual Orientation*, Simon LeVay defines *sexual orientation* as "the trait that predisposes us to experience sexual attraction."⁶

Aside from the ontological (identity) and the sociological (community) aspects, sexual orientation seems to convey a capacity or predisposition for sexual desire that is enduring and unchosen. With this understanding, do any existing biblical categories speak into this concept?

A Biblical Orientation Paradigm

Instead of differentiating between opposite-sex desires and same-sex desires, let's use the biblical categories of good desires and sinful desires.

Good sexual desires are those whose end is biblical marriage. Sinful sexual desires are those whose end is outside the context of biblical marriage.

Is there an existing biblical concept to address a capacity or predisposition for enduring, unchosen sinful desires? I believe there is. It's called a sinful nature—in other words, a sinful orientation.

Some English translations of the New Testament render the Greek word *sarx* as "sinful nature," while others render it literally as "flesh." *Sarx* is an important and particular concept in Paul's theology. Pauline expert Douglas Moo explains that especially in Paul's writings (such as in Romans and Galatians) the meaning of *sarx* is "the limitations of the human condition that have been imposed by sin."⁷

In Galatians 5:16–17, Paul explains how the flesh fights against the Spirit and the Spirit fights against the flesh. This dichotomous tension doesn't suggest that we have split natures inside us warring against each other; rather, *sarx* refers to the *whole* person marked by the rebellion—the "corruptibility and mortality"—of this present evil age.⁸

This reflects the redemptive-historical reality between the old self, characterized by the flesh, and the new self, characterized by the Holy Spirit of God. This tension between flesh and Spirit is evidence of the overlap between the present evil age and the coming age. The flesh represents this wicked era and our position under the dominion of sin and death. The Spirit represents the coming age and our freedom from the power of sin and the law.⁹ In this overlap, aspects of both ages are present together.

The reality is that "the present evil age" (Galatians 1:4) has not passed away and the implications of sin and the "old man" linger. As redeemed believers, though we're being renewed and transformed day by day, we live nonetheless with the vestiges of our old self and with our distorted post-Fall image. This is why we must be vigilant in the midst of tempta-

tions. Unlike Jesus, who had no sinful nature, we have a "landing pad" for those temptations that can quickly turn into sinful desire.¹⁰

A spiritual battle is raging "between God's Spirit and the impulse to sin."¹¹ This impulse no longer enslaves the believer, but it can still have an influence. We therefore face a daily fight. In Romans 8:13, Paul pleads with us: "If you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live."

Christ's salvific work certainly has inaugurated a new era, but this new era is also not fully consummated. This is what theologians call the "already but not yet." We've been set free, but we must continue with perseverance in the battle until that final and glorious day arrives. What does all this mean for those of us who have a predisposition for same-sex sexual and romantic desires? There are a couple of things to point out.

Living in the Already but Not Yet

For the Christian, a predisposition doesn't mean an inescapable predetermination. In Romans 6:6–7, Paul explains that the individual at the moment of regeneration is emancipated from the bondage of sin and fallen human nature: "We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin."

This freedom from sin's reign doesn't imply freedom from all sinning or a complete absence of temptations, but it's a decisive break with sin and a qualitative change in which our mind is less dark and our will is less rebellious. This new life is the sovereign work of God.

The Holy Spirit is the divine cause of our rebirth (John 3:5–6), and this freedom from sin is an act of God's grace: "Sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace" (Romans 6:14). As

John Piper explains, "Grace is not simply leniency when we have sinned. Grace is the enabling gift of God not to sin. Grace is power, not just pardon."¹²

The other thing to remember is our need to avoid extremes. At one extreme, we must not to cheapen God's grace and assume that we can keep on sinning because "love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8). This would be a distortion, and Paul speaks directly to this: "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?" (Romans 6:1–2).

But at the other extreme, some who have same-sex sexual temptations are overburdened with shame and guilt because they feel they aren't worthy of God's grace. They have repented and are not acting out but believe this struggle is the unpardonable sin. By recognizing that the issue is our flesh—our fallen human nature—we can daily realize that we're actually not that much different from anybody else. At the root, it all comes down to original sin. Every person has been corrupted by the moral consequence of the Fall. The exact form of temptation may be different, but the root cause is still the same. The issue is not whether we're tempted but how we respond.

Comfort comes from knowing that we're not alone. We need to be honest and transparent with trusted others about our struggles with unchosen and often ongoing temptations. However, further segregating ourselves into straight Christians and gay Christians gives the false impression that we're fundamentally different at the core of our being. We need more unity, not less, and this segregation by "orientation" is in essence a form of affective apartheid.

Instead, let's find solidarity in the fact that we all suffer from original sin—the moral consequence of the Fall—and that we're all in need of grace. Together we remind one another of our desperate need for the only solution for our sin nature: Christ and his body, the church.

THE BIBLICAL COVENANT OF MARRIAGE

More Than Companionship

As a policy, I never travel alone, and I'm blessed my mother has committed to travel with me wherever I go as my prayer warrior and someone to hold me accountable when I'm on the road. One Friday in April 2008, my mom was traveling with me during what could have been a disastrous situation.

We were flying out of Chicago, headed to Louisiana. I was officiating at a wedding the next day for my good friends Ryan and Hannah. As we checked our bags, the ticket counter representative gave my mother a boarding pass but said I would get mine at the gate. Strange—but she reassured me I had a seat for the flight to Baton Rouge.

At the gate, I asked the agent about my boarding pass and was told to wait patiently until my name was called. We waited at the gate for about half an hour before they started to board the plane. When I asked again about my boarding pass, I was told again to wait. The agent politely told my mother to go ahead and board the plane.

Not long after my mother boarded, the agent closed the door of the jet bridge. I've been flying long enough to know that once the door of the jet bridge closes, they do *not* open it for more passengers. I rushed to the agent and told her I needed to get on that flight. She apologized and explained there was a weight restriction, so no one else could get on the