

A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON SEXUAL IDENTITY

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Several years ago I was talking with a colleague about our mutual interest in teaching in Christian higher education. She shared with me that she enjoyed being a more liberal voice in a conservative environment. She could push students beyond their place of comfort to reflect on difficult topics. I understood what she was saying, but as I thought about it further, I realized that most people like to be able to do that; most instructors like to challenge their students, and our culture supports challenging norms and sources of tradition. Some would argue that our entire education system is challenging traditional assumptions and structures in ways that call many beliefs and values into question. Perhaps the greater challenge lies in identifying truths that are sustained over time, regardless of a changing sociocultural landscape. Of course, some topics necessitate a balancing act in which an accurate understanding of what is true and right requires both reevaluating existing understandings while recognizing the need to conserve teachings that are correct. Perhaps no topic in the twenty-first century in the modern, Western culture fits this description better than homosexuality.

Educators can always push students to learn more about the topic and to challenge their assumptions. At the same time, there is a need to discern what one believes about sexuality and, in particular, a Christian sexual ethic. The Christian sexual ethic itself is under fire; some think that science decisively refutes its core assumptions and assertions. Stan Jones and I wrote about four areas of scientific research that are often brought into the church's moral debate in order to change the church's doctrine and policy regarding same-sex unions and ordaining those in same-sex relationships: the prevalence of homosexuality, the etiology (or causes) of homosexuality, whether homosexuality is a pathology, and whether sexual orientation can change.²

Stan Jones and I recently updated the research in some of these central areas,³ so I begin below by briefly summarizing the relevant scientific material. Then I turn to sexual identity and

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² Stanton L. Jones and Mark A. Yarhouse, *Homosexuality: The Use of Scientific Research in the Church's Moral Debate* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000).

³ Stanton L. Jones and Alex W. Kwee, "Scientific Research, Homosexuality, and the Church's Moral Debate: An Update," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 24:4 (2005): 304–16; Mark A. Yarhouse and Jill L. Kays, "Homosexuality and Sexual Identity: An Update," in *Basic Issues in Sex Therapy* (Doug Rosenau, Michael Sytsma, and Debra Taylor, eds.), classroom packet to be published by the Institute for Sexual Wholeness, Atlanta, GA.

recent research on identity development and synthesis as an often overlooked but potentially helpful frame of reference for a Christian understanding of same-sex sexuality and behavior.

1. Science, Homosexuality, and the Christian Sexual Ethic

Christianity affirms that God created people to be in relationships, in families (Genesis 1–2).⁴ Creation teaches and Jesus, Paul, and others in the New Testament affirm that God intends people to be born into families with heterosexual marriage. This is important because it is in this context that God also places genital sex. Genital sex involves full sexual intimacy and its behavior expression. Christianity affirms that sexuality in general and genital sex in particular are good things, but it does not reduce human sexuality only to genital sex or behavioral expression. Christianity teaches that lifelong heterosexual relationships are God’s revealed will for full genital sexual intimacy, for the specific expression of our sexuality through behavior.

Christians understand sexuality to be a gift from God, an integral part of what it means to be human. Genital sexual activity is the means of procreation, which not only brings about life and reflects the divine act of creation but also is the basis for family life in all cultures throughout history. But sexuality is more than genital sexual activity. A Christian understanding of human sexuality is that it reflects *who we are* as much as or more so than *what we do*.⁵ Our sexuality instructs us of our need for God as we experience in our sexuality a longing for completion in another (*eros*). Indeed, a Christian understanding of sexuality focuses more on affirming this longing for completion as something that exists regardless of marital status or sexual experience; it is fundamental to what it means to be human. We long for the other, for completion, and even marriage, the context in which genital sexual behavior is completed, only points to the eternal or transcendent reality of completion in another. The marriage relationship, Scripture explains, reflects the relationship between God and ancient Israel⁶ and between Christ and the church, the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:22–33).

⁴ See Mark A. Yarhouse and James N. Sells, *Family Therapies: A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008); Robert R. Roberts, *Taking the Word to Heart: Self and Others in an Age of Therapies* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 81–105. It is in families that we learn much about ourselves, God, and others. The family is where we are to learn about our dependence upon God and how to relate to one another, including a sense of mutuality (our responsibility and obligation to one another). Family also provides a setting in which we learn self-denial and perseverance, as well as what it means to relate to one another with integrity. It is understandable, then, that God created the family as the context in which such important and far-reaching learning can take place.

⁵ An observation made by Lewis Smedes, *Sex for Christians: The Limits and Liberties of Sexual Living* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 231.

⁶ The Old Testament often compares Israel’s idolatry to adultery against God. God reveals how important idolatry is by drawing an analogy based on what humans know about marital intimacy (see Jeremiah 3:8). Cf. Raymond C. Ortlund, *God’s Unfaithful Wife: A Biblical Theology of Spiritual Adultery* (New Studies in Biblical Theology 2; Downers Grove: IVP, 1996).

Christianity, then, affirms that sex in marriage is a “life-uniting act”⁷ that is both physical and tied to transcendent purposes. That is why Scripture compares the intimacy of Christ’s relationship with the church to the marital relationship.⁸ This connection to transcendence contrasts with what commonly occurs in our contemporary culture. Take, for example, the “hook up” culture on many college campuses today.⁹ Christianity teaches that even hooking up is much more than just an exchange of bodily fluids, even if the two people engaged in the act insist otherwise. The act itself is tied to transcendent meaning that exists quite apart from the intentions of the people involved. Sex has a spiritual dimension to it such that any sex outside of the context of a life-union of a man and woman violates the meaning and purpose of sex.

How does homosexuality fit into this discussion? Perhaps this will come as a surprise, but homosexuality is not the focal point of the Christian sexual ethic. Rather, same-sex behavior is one of *many* sexual acts that fall outside of the context of a life-union between a man and a woman, including pre-marital and extra-marital sex, pornography, and so on. Christianity begins with a broader sexual ethic that affirms the good of physical creation and the good of our inherent sexuality.¹⁰ Christianity then moves to an understanding that God locates people in families and identifies the union of a man and woman as the relationship in which complete genital sexual intimacy is to occur. Sex can occur outside of that context, of course, and such acts will continue to point to a purpose beyond itself, but they occur and exist outside of God’s revealed will for genital sexual expression.

The Catholic and Protestant or Reformed Christian traditions have reflected this biblical understanding of life-long heterosexual marriage as the place or location for genital sexual behavior. Although the Church has witnessed many attempts to change historical Christian teaching on sexual ethics, the Christian sexual ethic is grounded in Scripture, and Christians have held it throughout church history. Indeed, it would be a radical departure from church tradition for Christians to bless or sanction same-sex behavior and relationships today. Those Christians

⁷ Smedes, *Sex for Christians*, 109, 112, 114–15, 181, 212. Smedes also discusses the instructional and pleasurable dimensions of sex. Sex has the potential to bring about new life and is the natural means by which a couple can procreate. Of course, not all sex in marriage brings about new life, whether by the intention of the couple or as a result of infertility (which Christianity sees as a result of the fall). Nevertheless, sexual intercourse is the means by which new life is formed, and the formation of new life occurs in a specific relationship: heterosexual marriage.

⁸ Christine Colón and Bonnie Field note that while marriage is instructive of Christ’s relationship to the church it should not be used to idolize marriage or denigrate being single. In fact, singles also reflect important values regarding Christianity, including our primary loyalty and identity as followers of Christ rather than tied to biological family. See Christine A. Colón and Bonnie E. Field, *Singled Out: Why Celibacy Must Be Reinvented in Today’s Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009), 167.

⁹ Donna Freitas, *Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on American’s College Campuses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁰ For a concise discussion, see Christopher Ash, *Christianity and Sexuality* (ed. D. A. Carson; Christ on Campus Initiative; Deerfield, IL: Carl F. H. Henry Center for Theological Understanding, 2009), <http://tgc-documents.s3.amazonaws.com/cc/Ash.pdf>.

who are making this shift seem to be doing so based on “reason” and personal experience rather than the teachings of Scripture or church tradition.

This brings us to our brief overview of the current understanding of reason and its use today in the church’s moral debates. The four main areas are prevalence, causes, status as a pathology, and change of sexual orientation. I will briefly review our understanding of these four areas and their relevance to the church’s moral debate.

1.1. The Prevalence of Homosexuality

About 2–3% of the U.S. adult population reports a homosexual orientation.¹¹ Those who argue that prevalence rates should affect how the church thinks about the moral debate often point to older studies, such as those conducted by Alfred Kinsey in the 1950s that suggested higher prevalence estimates.

More recent research has confirmed these percentages as likely holding rather stable over time,¹² although it will be interesting to see if there is an increase in the self-report of attraction or orientation given a more open and permissive sociocultural context.¹³ In keeping with this line of thought, homosexuality is more prevalent in urban settings than either suburban or rural ones. These differences are likely due both to people moving to urban settings to be with others who have similar experiences and to a kind of dis-inhibition towards sexuality and sexual expression that can occur in urban settings. But taken together the national averages are about 2–3% of the population.

Would higher prevalence estimates affect Christian teaching in this area? Some argue that it should, but Christianity has not historically considered how prevalent a concern is. Some might argue that an increase in the rates of some behaviors might reflect greater or broader acceptance of expressions of the fall that Christians should be not endorse. For example, sexual addiction is now much more prevalent in the United States, yet Christians do not relate the prevalence of sexual addiction to the morality of sexual addiction. Many Christians see it as reflecting a culture that emphasizes individual interests and a hedonic worldview in which personal pleasure is pursued at the expense of others, particularly women, who are objectified in ways that further the interests of others. The cultural dis-inhibition towards sexual expression that supports and

¹¹ Edward O. Laumann, John H. Gagnon, R. T. Michael, and S. Michaels, *The Social Organization of Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

¹² P. J. Egan, M. S. Edelman, and K. Sherrill, *Findings from the Hunter College Poll of Lesbians, Gays, and Bisexuals: New Discoveries about Identity, Political Attitudes, and Civic Engagement* (New York: The City University of New York, 2008). Of the 2.9% who consider themselves gay, lesbian, or bisexual, 51.1% identified as lesbian, gay/homosexual, while 48.9% identified as bisexual. Males were more likely to be gay/homosexual (68.4%) than bisexual (31.6%), whereas females were more likely to be bisexual (65.3%) than lesbian (34.7%). These findings are consistent with the understanding of greater sexual fluidity among females than males.

¹³ See Debby Herbenick, Michael Reece, Vanessa Schick, Stephanie A. Sanders, Brian Dodge, and J. Dennis Fortenberry, “Sexual Behavior in the United States: Results from a National Probability Sample of Men and Women Ages 14–94,” *Journal of Sexual Medicine* 7 (2010): 255–65. In this study, 4.2% of adult males identified themselves as gay and 0.9% of adult females identified as lesbian.

facilitates sexual addiction is not an improvement. So prevalence is not logically related to the moral argument. Christians recognize that some patterns of sin may be more common, such as envy, while other patterns may be quite rare, such as necrophilia. How common or how rare a pattern of behavior is has not historically determined its morality. Its prevalence and morality are separate issues.

1.2. Causes of Homosexuality

The debate about what causes homosexuality has also figured prominently in the church moral debates. Those who argue for changing the Christian sexual ethic claim if homosexuality is the result of biology then same-sex behavior is not outside of God's will for sexual expression. As I have met with families struggling with this question, they seem to be asking, "Does God make people gay?" More accurately, the question is whether God makes a person attracted to the same sex or whether God makes a person with a homosexual orientation. However, the reality of same-sex attraction or a homosexual orientation does not speak to whether it is from God or not. This points to the broader topic of a theology of sexual identity, including theodicy.¹⁴ It is a question of how to make sense of experiences that may result from the fall. Just as we do not interpret the existence of predispositions toward depression or anxiety as God making a person depressed or anxious, we want to be cautious about jumping to the conclusion that the existence of an experience or condition reflects God's intention for that person. Even non-pathological concerns, such as variations in normal human temperament or personality, can be understood with reference to God's intentions for persons. People may be predisposed to neuroticism (or emotional instability) but still have to think beyond "God made me this way" to "How does God want me to grow in Christ-likeness such that I display the fruit of the Spirit in my life and my relationships?"

The biological hypothesis for the origins of homosexuality has been forcefully advanced for two decades now. Studies have been published on a number of supposed connections, including research on twin studies,¹⁵ fraternal birth order and handedness,¹⁶ and animal models

¹⁴ Theodicy, which we discuss in greater detail in §5 below, refers to the theological study of God and God's character in light of the existence of evil and suffering, including the impact of the fall on the created order, which can include natural disasters, gratuitous evil, the sin that is harbored in an individual person's heart, and so on. See D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 15–35.

¹⁵ N. Långström, Q. Rahman, E. Carlström, and P. Lichtenstein, "Genetic and Environmental Effects on Same-Sex Sexual Behavior: A Population Study of Twins in Sweden," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 39:1 (2008): 75–80. Unfortunately, most human sexuality textbooks still cite the famous study by Michael Bailey and Richard Pillard in which they reported a 52% probandwise concordance rate among identical twins. A far superior twin study also by Michael Bailey is the one in which he drew his sample from the Australian twin registry (a more representative sample); the "probandwise concordance" fell from 52% to 20% for identical twins. J. M. Bailey, M. P. Dunne, and N. G. Martin, "Genetic and Environmental Influences on Sexual Orientation and Its Correlates in an Australian Twin Wample," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 78 (2000): 524–36. The original, often-cited study with inflated probandwise concordance rates is J. Michael Bailey and Richard C. Pillard, "A Genetic Study of Male Sexual Orientation," *Archives of General Psychiatry* 48 (1991): 1081–96.

(in which homosexual behavior is either observed in nature or the result of genetic, hormonal or other manipulations).¹⁷ Some of the most recent research has considered genetic scanning¹⁸ and brain symmetry and neural connections.¹⁹

Someone interested in the research on the causes might ask whether any research is being conducted on environmental contributions to homosexuality. As I mentioned earlier, the biological hypothesis has been advanced for years now and remains the primary focal point. Studies of environmental contributions have not received funding, and previous studies have been neglected in favor of the current emphasis on nature over nurture.

Given the limitations in the research that has attempted to establish biology as the primary determinant in homosexuality, most experts today believe that sexual orientation is the result of many possible contributing factors. These factors are likely weighted differently for different people. The American Psychological Association may have it right when the organization recently summarized the research:

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 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.²⁰

I think it is important that we recognize that people do not choose to experience same-sex attraction or to have a homosexual orientation as such. They find themselves with attractions

¹⁶ R. Blanchard, "Review of Theory and Handedness, Birth Order, and Homosexuality in Men," *Laterality* 13 (2008): 51–70; R. Blanchard, J. M. Cantor, A. F. Bogaert, S. M. Breedloe, and L. Ellis, "Interaction of Fraternal Birth Order and Handedness in the Development of Male Homosexuality," *Hormones and Behavior* 49 (2006): 405–14; R. Blanchard and R. A. Lippa, "Birth Order, Sibling Sex Ratio, Handedness, and Sexual Orientation of Male and Female Participants in a BBC Internet Research Project," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 36 (2007): 163–76; A. F. Bogaert, R. Blanchard, and L. E. Crosthwait, "Interaction of Birth Order, Handedness, and Sexual Orientation in the Kinsey Interview Data," *Behavioral Neuroscience* 5 (2007): 845–53.

¹⁷ For example, Demir and Dickson generated a gene fragment (the "fruitless [*fru*]" allele or one member of a pair of genes on a chromosome) that was spliced in either the male or female mode in the chromosome of the opposite sex. For example, if male fruit flies are genetically manipulated, they will not engage in male courtship behavior. If female fruit flies are genetically manipulated, they will engage in male courtship behavior. See E. Demir and B. J. Dickson, "Fruitless Splicing Specifies Male Courtship Behavior in *Drosophila*," *Cell* 121 (2005): 320–26.

¹⁸ Brian S. Mustanski, M. G. Dupree, C. M. Nievergelt, S. Bocklandt, N. J. Schork, and Dean H. Hamer, "A Genomewide Scan of Male Sexual Orientation," *Human Genetics* 116:4 (2005): 272–78.

¹⁹ Ivanka Savic and Per Lindström, "PET and MRI Show Differences in Cerebral Asymmetry and Functional Connectivity between Homo- and Heterosexual Subjects," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 105:27 (July 8, 2008): 9403–8.

²⁰ American Psychological Association, "Answers to Your Questions for a Better Understanding of Sexual Orientation and Homosexuality" (<http://www.apa.org/topics/sexuality/orientation.pdf>).

toward the same sex. It is unclear why some people experience same-sex attractions or have a homosexual orientation. As I mentioned above, there are probably many factors that contribute in one way or another, and these factors probably vary from person to person.

This is probably the most frequently cited area of research in the contemporary discussions about the Christian sexual ethic and homosexual behavior. Many people struggle with how to make sense of sexual ethics if a person does not choose experiences of same-sex attraction. However, the Christian sexual ethic does not hinge on the causes of sexual orientation. Whether an impulse comes “from within” or is the result of one’s environment or, more likely, if an impulse is the result of some combination, Christianity teaches that believers evaluate their impulses in light of God’s revealed will for behavior and whether a pattern of behavior ought to characterize the Christian over time.

1.3. Homosexuality as a Psychopathology

Homosexuality is not considered a mental illness by the major mental health organizations. It was removed from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1973 by the American Psychiatric Association, and the focus since that time has been on ways to support sexual minorities in their identity development and to treat mental health concerns with which members of the gay community often contend.

For example, many experts today recognize that members of the gay community are at greater risk for mood disorders, anxiety disorders, substance use disorders, suicidality, and poor self-esteem, among other concerns.²¹ Minority stress models have been the primary lens through which researchers and theorists have understood these elevations, that is, increased psychological distress and social stress associated with being a sexual minority can lead to these and other health concerns.²²

Our culture has witnessed a remarkable shift that led to the removal of homosexuality from the list of mental health concerns.²³ More than that, we are now part of a sociocultural context in which there is quite a positive view of homosexuality as a healthy expression of sexual

²¹ Susan D. Cochran, J. G. Sullivan, and V. M. Mays, “Prevalence of Mental Disorders, Psychological Distress, and Mental Health Services Use among Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adults in the United States,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 71 (2003): 53–61; Susan D. Cochran and V. M. Mays, “Physical Health Complaints among Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexual and Homosexually Experienced Heterosexual Individuals: Results from the California Quality of Life Survey,” *American Journal of Public Health* 97 (2007): 2048–55; Susan D. Cochran, V. M. Mays, M. Alegria, A. N. Ortega, and D. Takeuchi, “Mental Health and Substance Use Disorders among Latino and Asian American Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adults,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 75 (2007): 785–94; T. L. Hughes, “Lesbians’ Drinking Patterns: Beyond the Data,” *Substance Use and Misuse* 38 (2003): 1739–58; R. J. Lewis, V. J. Derlega, J. L. Griffin, and A. C. Krowinski, “Stressors for Gay Men and Lesbians: Life Stress, Gay-related Stress, Stigma Consciousness, and Depressive Symptoms,” *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 22 (2003): 716–29; C. Yelland and M. Tiggeman, “Muscularity and the Gay Ideal: Body Dissatisfaction and Disordered Eating in Homosexual Men,” *Eating Behaviors* 4 (2003): 107–16.

²² Cochran and Mays, “Physical Health Complaints,” 2048–55.

²³ Ronald Bayer, *Homosexuality and American Psychiatry: The Politics of Diagnosis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

diversity. How do these changes impact the Christian sexual ethic? Ultimately, changes in cultural understandings of what constitutes a mental health concern do not drive the Christian understanding of moral concerns. Indeed, there are many mental health concerns—bipolar disorder, panic disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder—that are not moral issues, just as envy, sloth, and gluttony are moral concerns but not mental disorders. While some Christians may prefer to see cultural consensus in areas of morality, mental health, law, and other domains, Christians will have to examine what it is they believe about matters of morality and the Christian sexual ethic, particularly as these other domains change their conclusions in an ever-changing sociocultural context.

1.4. Change of Sexual Orientation

When homosexuality was considered a mental disorder by the major mental health associations, professionals provided treatment to change a person's sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual. These professional treatments included psychoanalysis,²⁴ behavioral therapy,²⁵ and aversive treatments,²⁶ as well as group therapies²⁷ from a number of similar theoretical orientations. The published rates of success were about 30% although it varied what counted as success in these different studies, ranging from decreased self-reported or therapist/analyst-reported reductions in same-sex attraction, fantasy, and/or homosexual behavior to increased self-report or therapist/analyst report of opposite-sex attraction, fantasy, and/or behavior to heterosexual marriage.

More recent surveys suggest that some clinicians still provide therapy to change sexual orientation,²⁸ and two recent studies suggest that change is possible for some people who attempt

²⁴ J. A. Hadfield, "The Cure of Homosexuality," *British Medical Journal* (June 7, 1958): 1323–26; Lawrence Hatterer, *Changing Heterosexuality in the Male: Treatment for Men Troubled by Homosexuality* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970).

²⁵ William Freeman and Robert G. Meyer, "A Behavioral Alteration of Sexual Preferences in the Human Male," *Behavior Therapy* 6 (1975): 206–12.

²⁶ Nathaniel McConaghy, "Subjective and Penile Plethysmograph Responses to Aversion Therapy for Homosexuality: A Follow-up," *British Journal of Psychiatry* 117 (1970): 555–60; "Is a Homosexual Orientation Irreversible?" *British Journal of Psychiatry* 129 (1976): 556–63; M. J. MacCulloch and M. P. Feldman, "Aversion Therapy in Management of 43 Homosexuals," *British Medical Journal* 2 (1967): 594–97.

²⁷ L. Birk, "Group Psychotherapy for Men who are Homosexual," *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy*, 1 (1974): 29–52. Frank S. Pittman and C. D. DeYoung, "The Treatment of Homosexuals in Heterogeneous Groups," *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy* 21 (1971): 62–73; J. Munzer, "Treatment of the Homosexual in Group Psychotherapy," *Topical Problems of Psychotherapy* 5 (1965): 164–69; R. A. Truax and G. Tourney, "Male Homosexuals in Group Psychotherapy," *Diseases of the Nervous System* 32 (1971): 707–11.

²⁸ Houston MacIntosh, "Attitudes and Experiences of Psychoanalysts," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 42:4 (1994): 1183–1207. MacIntosh published data based on semi-random survey of psychoanalysts (which had an unusually high response rate of 67.5%). Among respondents, 274 analysts reported working with 1215 homosexual patients. Of the homosexual patients treated, analysts reported that 276 (22.7% with 23.9% of males and 20.2% of females) changed their sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual, and 84.0% obtained "significant therapeutic benefit" (again, the sexes were nearly identical, with 85.3% of males and

it. The first was conducted by Robert Spitzer and published in 2003. Spitzer studied 200 people who claimed to have changed orientation. He interviewed them and documented their claims of change by looking at what they said they were like prior to their change attempt and what they were like at the time of the interview.

I was involved in the other recent study on whether sexual orientation can change.²⁹ I worked with Stanton Jones of Wheaton College on a longitudinal study of religiously mediated change of orientation. We reported on data from a group of 98 persons who were initially in a change attempt with a Christian ministry affiliated with Exodus International (the largest umbrella organization of such ministries at that time). Those involved in the change attempt reported an average decrease in attraction to the same sex and a more modest increase in attraction to the opposite sex. These averages suggest that individual participants had more positive results, while others did not.

At the time of our original publication, we categorized participants based on what they said of their change efforts. We used categories such as “success” and “failure” only with reference to the goals of the participants themselves, in terms of being a part of Exodus to experience a change in attractions or orientation. In total, participants fell into six categories. We indicated that 15% were what we called *Success: Conversion* (which reflected a conversion from homosexuality to heterosexuality), while 23% were categorized as *Success: Chastity* (or a sufficient reduction in same-sex attraction so that the person reported the freedom to live chaste without it being the burden it once was). Another 29% of the participants were categorized as *Continuing change effort*, which meant there was some reduction in attraction but not enough to describe themselves as having experienced success. Fifteen percent of participants were designated as having *No Response* to change effort. Four percent were categorized as *Failure: Confused*, while 8% were designated *Failure: Gay Identity*.

Our updated results after six to seven years in the change effort suggested that the average changes made were able to be sustained over time. As with the changes reported after three years in a change attempt, the average gains of diminished same-sex attraction (or away from homosexuality) were stronger than the average gains of increased opposite-sex attraction (or toward heterosexuality). In this assessment, we asked people how they would designate themselves in light of the previous categories we had used, and *Success: Conversion* (to heterosexuality) rose to 23% of the remaining sample, while *Success: Chastity* also increased to 30% of the sample.

As important as these findings are for those considering a change attempt, most people do not experience change of sexual orientation; the reported changes are best thought of as gains

81.3% of females achieving “significant therapeutic benefit”). Both male and female patients spent an average of about four years in analysis.

²⁹ Stanton L. Jones and Mark A. Yarhouse, *Ex-Gays?* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2007); Stanton L. Jones and Mark A. Yarhouse, “Ex-Gays? An Extended Longitudinal Study of Attempted Religiously Mediated Change in Sexual Orientation” (presented at the American Psychological Association’s Annual Conference, Toronto, Ontario, August 9, 2009).

along a continuum of attraction rather than categorical changes from homosexual to heterosexual. Indeed, most people who report a heterosexual outcome would acknowledge some experiences of attraction to the same sex.

In any case, what is the formal relevance of the change research on the moral debate facing the church today? In the most extreme example, what if nobody experienced change? Although that was not the case, when we look at the debate about whether homosexual orientation can change, Christians understand that change is also not directly relevant to the moral debate. The Christian sexual ethic is a part of a larger identity that is grounded in being faithful to God's revealed will and honoring God with our lives. From a Christian perspective, if God's revealed will is that full genital sexual contact should occur only in the context of a life-long heterosexual union, then same-sex behavior is the primary concern rather than same-sex attraction or orientation. If neither attractions nor orientation change, the sexual ethic remains, so believers must take responsibility for whether and how they express their impulses in their behavior. In that sense all people are capable of conforming to God's expressed will in this area. This response will be viewed as quite foreign and perhaps more radical to a culture that sees no reason whatsoever to resist impulses that feel like self-expression. Indeed, we are a culture of self-actualization, and sexual self-actualization is one of the most salient examples of how people in our culture express themselves.³⁰

1.5. Concluding Thoughts on Relevance of Science to the Christian Sexual Ethic

What role does science play in how Christians think about human sexuality, specifically homosexuality and same-sex behavior? Science offers important insights into our understanding of many things today, not the least of which is same-sex sexuality and its expression. However, science cannot answer the difficult moral questions that are being raised today. The methods of science can tell us about what occurs and what is measurable, about what people do and perhaps provide insight into factors that may contribute to impulses and patterns of behavior, as well as broader concepts such as orientation. However, science cannot tell us what *ought* to be or how we *should* live or which impulses we *should* follow. Students who have taken Philosophy 101 will recognize the naturalistic fallacy, that is, the tendency to confuse what *is* with what *ought to be*. The questions related to human purpose and morality and ethics have to be answered by more than what we can measure through the scientific method, as important as that is.

We turn now to an often overlooked concept that is critical for a nuanced Christian understanding of same-sex attraction, orientation, and behavior: sexual identity.

³⁰ And yet the biblical images for the believer in culture tend to reflect a Christian life as one in which the believer faces challenges (2 Timothy 2:1–15). Paul often draws on metaphors such as the military (Ephesians 6:10–11; 1 Timothy 6:12) and athletics (1 Corinthians 9:24–27; 2 Timothy 4:7) to convey aspects of what it means to be a follower of Christ.

2. Sexual Identity

I was recently rewriting a chapter for a revised edition of a book on Christian ethics in counseling and related mental health disciplines. The title of the original chapter was “The Homosexual Client.” The title of the revised chapter is “The Sexual Minority Client.” I recommended that change and recognize that it reflects a shift that has occurred in our culture in only a few years: we are talking more about identity than ever before. Sexual identity refers to the labeling that occurs when a person designates themselves as gay, straight or bi. Other labels include curious, queer, bi-curious, and questioning. This fascination with labeling is an interesting development and should be understood in the context of an emerging movement of persons designated as sexual minorities; they are numerically in the minority by virtue of a formed identity associated with their experiences of same-sex attraction.

Most people report attraction to the opposite sex.³¹ They designate themselves as heterosexual, and they form an identity that reflects that experience. Their identity is both public (others know them as heterosexual) and private (they think of themselves as heterosexual). This experience of identity development is so common it is rarely studied.³² However, a smaller percentage of people reports attraction to the same sex, and a smaller percentage of people experience such a consistent or persistent attraction to the same sex that they would say that they are oriented toward the same sex (i.e., that same sex sexuality is their orientation). Edward Laumann and his colleagues reported that 6.0% of adult males and 4.4% of adult females report same-sex attraction and that 2.0% of adult males and 0.9% of adult females report a homosexual orientation.³³

This brings us to the definition of sexual minorities and why I thought it was helpful to make the switch in the revised chapter mentioned above. Numerically, persons who experience same-sex attraction are in the minority. The designation of sexual minority itself can be made regardless of identity label, and so I will define sexual minorities as “individuals with same-sex attractions or behavior, regardless of self-identifications.”³⁴ This seems especially relevant to

³¹ This language is also shifting in academic circles with a preference shown toward “other” sex rather than “opposite” sex. The thinking comes largely from those in the transgender community. They prefer this umbrella designation that includes transsexual persons, transvestic persons, cross-dressers, intersexed persons, and others since “opposite” designates a binary view of both biological sex and of gender in which the assumption is that male and female are normative. Of course, not all persons in the transgender community adhere to this; some believe in a binary view as normative and are sorting out their own experience with gender identity and related issues in light of that understanding.

³² Roger L. Worthington, Holly B. Savoy, Frank R. Dillon, and Elizabeth R. Vernaglia, “Heterosexual Identity Development: A Multidimensional Model of Individual and Social Identity,” *The Counseling Psychologist* 30:4 (2002): 496–531; Jonathan J. Mohr, “Heterosexual Identity and the Heterosexual Therapist: An Identity Perspective on Sexual Orientation Dynamics in Psychotherapy,” *The Counseling Psychologist* 30:4 (2002): 532–66.

³³ Edward O. Laumann, John H. Gagnon, R. T. Michael, and S. Michaels, *The Social Organization of Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

³⁴ Lisa M. Diamond, “A Dynamical Systems Approach to the Development and Expression of Female Same-Sex Sexuality,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 2:2 (2007): 142.

Christians, some of whom do not adopt a gay identity label although they would admit to ongoing attraction to the same sex. What they reject is the label, not the reality of their attractions. But how do people come to adopt a sexual minority label? How does that label or designation come to reflect who that person experiences themselves to be? This line of research is referred to as sexual identity development, and we want to look at that research for key benchmarks in the development and synthesis of sexual identity over time.

2.1. Sexual Identity Development and Synthesis

At the outset it is important to understand that the research on sexual identity development is based on the recollections of adults who are looking back on their lives and identifying key milestone events in identity formation. A better way to study identity development would be to study children longitudinally so that we see the process unfold in their lives through adolescence and into young and middle adulthood. However, the research we have so far is based on questions answered by adults who are looking back on their lives. The questions themselves are based upon researchers' understandings of sexual identity and key events that may be a part of a person's decision to label later in life.

The way this information used to be understood was through models of identity development. There were originally models of homosexual identity development that presumed that male and female experience would be identical. If you are familiar with early racial identity development models, you will understand the basic approach of a sexual identity development model, at least some of the early ones. The models tended to begin with the understanding of feeling different than others in one's peer group and that the difference was due to gender nonconformity or attractions that might have been confusing.³⁵ The next stage was toward recognizing the possibility that one might be gay. This was followed by a growing certainty of a gay identity, which eventually led to pride in being gay that over time led to a more balanced view in which the person recognized the good and bad that was part of both the gay community and part of the heterosexual community.

These early models of sexual identity development were soon challenged by separate models of male homosexual identity development and lesbian sexual identity development.³⁶ Then, as sexual minorities continued to grow and nuance their experiences, models of bisexual

³⁵ Vivian Cass, "Homosexual Identity Formation: A Theoretical Model," *Journal of Homosexuality* 4 (1979): 219–35. According to Cass, homosexual identity develops as follows: (a) identity confusion (questioning identity because of same-sex attraction); (b) identity comparison (concluding there is difference based on same-sex attraction); (c) identity tolerance (assuming one is probably gay); (d) identity acceptance (accepting a gay identity); (e) identity pride (pride in a gay identity); and (f) identity synthesis (self-identification as "gay" is moderated and one part of who one is).

³⁶ S. R. McCarn and Ruth E. Fassinger, "Revisioning Sexual Minority Identity Formation: A New Model of Lesbian Identity and Its Implications for Counseling and Research," *The Counseling Psychologist* 24:3 (1996): 508–34; J. Sophie, "A Critical Examination of Stage Theories of Lesbian Identity Development," *Journal of Homosexuality* 12:2 (1986): 39–51.

identity development emerged,³⁷ followed by models of ethnic minority sexual identity development models.³⁸ Bisexuals within the gay community indicated that they had different developmental experiences in light of their attractions to both the same and opposite sexes, while ethnic minorities who were attracted to the same sex indicated that they too had different experiences and that the existing models were based primarily on White samples.

Another group was also underrepresented in the existing models of identity development. That is, the existing models did not adequately address the experiences of those persons who did not attain a gay (or lesbian or bisexual) identity synthesis. That is, there is a group of people who do not identify themselves as gay—they appear to dis-identify with a gay identity and the people and organizations that support a gay identity—and they do not appear to be accounted for sufficiently in the various models of identity development.³⁹

What I proposed at the time was that perhaps personal and religious beliefs and values held by sexual minorities influence the decision to integrate same-sex attractions into a gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity synthesis and that the key stage might include the cognitive process of attribution or meaning-making.⁴⁰ I acknowledged that a young person might very well go through a time of identity confusion because of experiences of same-sex attraction and that they then make attributions about what their attraction to the same sex means to them. For example, in a small study of Christian sexual minorities, one male we interviewed shared his experience feeling like an outsider: “You don’t belong to anywhere. . . . You don’t belong to guys. I had a lot of ‘girl’ friends. Just felt like an outsider. And it was, when I was a child it wasn’t really bad because I didn’t really care. When I got in my teens it meant a lot to me as I grew up.”⁴¹

The most common attribution for most adults who talk about this time in their life is that their attractions signaled a gay identity. What I mean by this is that they attribute their attractions to being a categorically different kind of person, a person whose identity is formed *vis-à-vis* his

³⁷ R. C. Fox, “Bisexual Identities,” in *Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identities over the Lifespan: Psychological Perspectives* (ed. A. R. D’Augelli and C. J. Patterson; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 48–86.

³⁸ C. S. Chan, “Issues of Identity Development among Asian-American Lesbian and Gay Men,” *Journal of Counseling and Development* 68 (1989): 16–20.

³⁹ Miroslav Volf made an interesting observation about those who do not fit certain narratives: “Those who are conveniently left out of the modern narrative of inclusion because they disturb the integrity of its ‘happy ending’ plot demand a long and gruesome counter-narrative of exclusion” (*Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1996], 59). In my experience, those who dis-identify with a gay identity live a very difficult counter-narrative of exclusion—often from both the gay community and from the Christian community.

⁴⁰ Mark A. Yarhouse, “Sexual Identity Development: The Influence of Valuable Frameworks on Identity Synthesis,” *Psychotherapy* 38 (2001): 331–41. The model of the influence of valuable frameworks on sexual identity synthesis has five stages: (a) identity confusion/crisis (b) identity attribution, (c) identity foreclosure versus identity expansion, (d) identity reappraisal, and (e) identity synthesis.

⁴¹ Mark A. Yarhouse, Heather L. Brooke, Paula Pisano, and Erica S. N. Tan, “Project Inner Compass: Young Adults Experiencing Sexual Identity Confusions,” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 24:4 (2005): 357.

or her attraction to the same sex. Other attributions might be that their attractions reflect the human fallen condition, much like how atypical levels of neurotransmitters in the brain (e.g., serotonin, dopamine) might signal the fall and lead to depression or anxiety in a person.

Once initial attributions are made, a person might then form an identity as gay, a process that really usually does not require much reflection but is a kind of foreclosing on a gay identity by virtue of having no alternative attributions available to a young person. Again, a smaller number of young people might expand their identity beyond attraction to the same sex and begin thinking of themselves in other ways. This happens, for example, when a Christian forms their identity “in Christ” rather than around their attraction to the same sex. A person might revisit this decision about identity over time, evaluate how successful it has been for them, and possibly explore other identity options. But in the end a person synthesizes their identity as gay, or they decide not to identify as gay, having formed their identity around other aspects of who they are as a person. This experience of identity synthesis is also characterized by congruence. The person is able to live and identify themselves in ways that are consistent with his or her beliefs and values. (I will return to this model and this idea of congruence because it is important for Christians who are sorting out sexual identity conflicts in their own lives.)

The emphasis on models of sexual identity development has shifted in recent years toward discussions of key milestone events in the lives of sexual minorities. Theorists and researchers have been dissatisfied with the various stage models of identity development, have challenged whether synthesis is really sustained, and have raised a number of other questions about that line of research. Milestone events, then, refer to benchmarks in identity development among sexual minorities. They are the experiences that many sexual minorities report as part of their history.

The movement away from identity development models to theories and research on milestone events reflects some of the challenges and weaknesses in some of the early models of identity development. The focus on milestone events also raises the question of the role of attributions and meaning-making as important cognitive processes that can be lost if not specifically asked about in surveys. We will return to the importance found in making meaning out of attractions in the context of one’s life and identity.

2.2. Milestone Events

Milestones refer to actual stone markers that would be set up alongside a road to indicate distance from various points of interest. They often indicate how far a traveler has come or how much further a traveler has to go on their journey. You can see why we often refer to milestone events in a person’s life as key moments that are particularly salient to that individual. Milestone events can occur professionally, such as hiring and promotion, and they can also occur developmentally, as psychologists will talk about language development, motor development, and so on, in the life of a child.

Sexual minorities have also begun to identify milestone events in their own experience. These are essentially benchmarks in the formation of a gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity. The

primary milestone events that have been identified include first experience of same-sex attraction, first experience of same-sex behavior to orgasm, labeling oneself as gay, lesbian, or bisexual,⁴² disclosure of identity to others, and first same-sex relationship. Many in the gay community claim that the average age of first labeling oneself as gay is about age fifteen,⁴³ with awareness of attractions as young as about age ten, initial same-sex behavior to orgasm occurring at about age twelve or thirteen. So labeling appears to occur after initial behavior. Disclosure of one's gay identity occurs after this, at an average age of about eighteen, and usually involves telling friends first and then perhaps family members, with one's mother being told before one's father is told. The remaining milestone event that is typically discussed in this context is first same-sex relationship, which reportedly occurs at about age nineteen.

In a series of studies conducted through the Institute for the Study of Sexual Identity, we have identified some of the experiences and some of the challenges Christians who are also sexual minorities face in navigating sexual identity development. For example, we reported somewhat similar milestone events in identity development, that is, awareness of attraction to the same sex occurred at an average age of thirteen, followed by same-sex behavior to orgasm at an average age of sixteen to seventeen, labeling at about age eighteen, and first same-sex relationship at an average age of between eighteen and nineteen.⁴⁴ It is important to note, however, that we asked additional questions based on our experience and theory of sexual identity. For instance, we distinguished between an initial attribution that a person is gay and taking on the label of gay. Also, most Christians in our study did not engage in same-sex behavior (fewer than 30%), and even fewer Christian sexual minorities adopted a gay identity label (14.4%) or had an ongoing same-sex relationship (20.2%).

This suggests that identity development is a different experience for Christian sexual minorities, particularly as so few report the experiences that are widely recognized as normative among sexual minorities who go through a process of identity development and synthesis.

⁴² I am offering the three most common sexual minority labels. Others include curious, questioning, bi-curious, queer, and so on. Also, many younger sexual minorities prefer not to identify themselves by sexual identity labels for any number of reasons. See Ritch C. Savin-Williams, *The New Gay Teenager* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 167–69.

⁴³ E. M. Dube and R. C. Savin-Williams, "Sexual Identity Development among Ethnic-Minority Male Youths," *Developmental Psychology* 35:6 (1999): 1389–98. This study was of a sample of gay males, and, as in much of psychology, we appear to be more confident in our understanding of the experiences of males rather than females.

⁴⁴ Mark A. Yarhouse, Stephen P. Stratton, Janet B. Dean, and Heather L. Brooke, "Listening to Sexual Minorities on Christian College Campuses," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 37:2 (2009): 96–113. This was the first study of its kind in that we looked exclusively at the experiences of sexual minorities on Christian college campuses, including milestone events in sexual identity development and sexual minorities' experiences of campus climate. Interestingly, although many participants acknowledged that Christian colleges can be negative climates for sexual minorities—as evidenced in derogatory name-calling that occurs among fellow students—few wanted to see such colleges change their official teaching or policies regarding homosexuality or homosexual behavior. Indeed, many seemed to select Christian colleges precisely for the conventionally religious teachings that informed the campus policies.

In another study we conducted with a community sample (in contrast to a sample of undergraduates), we reported that identity synthesis or coming to terms with one's identity label and having confidence in it as an accurate reflection of who a person is did not occur until much later in life than we expected. Recall that in mainstream gay studies identity synthesis is thought to occur at around age fifteen with later disclosure of identity further consolidating that designation. This may be the result of how these studies are conducted because they often rely on undergraduate samples or community samples of older gay adolescents who may be reporting a final gay identity in their late teens. However, when we studied Christian sexual minorities in the community, we found that those who identified as both gay and Christian stated that they reached this point of synthesis at an average age of twenty-six, which is much later than we expected. Similarly, those who dis-identified with a gay identity indicated that they reached this point of identity synthesis, this confidence in their identity label, at an average age of thirty-four, which reflects an even later date of synthesis. Why so much later? As I indicated, this may have a lot to do with the way the samples are obtained: if you study only undergraduates, you should not be surprised to see the "whole story" told with an ending that is reached by the early twenties. Community samples of adults provide us with an opportunity to see how the experience of identity development may extend much further beyond the college years. The fact that our samples were also Christian suggests that perhaps people who take their faith identity seriously face more challenges in navigating sexual identity labels, as a gay identity is often understood to conflict with a Christian identity. It may be that the ability to navigate that difficult terrain keeps identity synthesis from occurring at an earlier age.

3. Identity and the Christian Faith

Chloe is a twenty-six year-old woman who has experienced attraction to the same sex since she was age thirteen. For much of her older adolescence she tried on a lesbian identity, but over time she did not experience that identity label as consistent with her religious identity as a Christian. She chose not to identify as lesbian despite having many friends suggest that she would be better off if she just came to terms with who she "really is." Chloe does not deny that she has strong emotional and sexual attraction to other women, nor does she deny that she has little (if any) sexual attraction toward men. But it's the identity and labeling part of her life that has been so challenging. She does not have a good word for who she is apart from language that she feels in conflict about because of her Christian identity and values.

The study of multiple aspects of identity is referred to as *intersectionality*. This term refers to "the manner in which multiple aspects of identity may combine in different ways to construct social reality."⁴⁵ When discussed in the multicultural movement, it often refers to the experiences of non-White, non-heterosexual experiences in combination—so African American

⁴⁵ Janis V. Sanchez-Hucles and Donald D. Davis, "Women and Women of Color in Leadership: Complexity, Identity, and Intersectionality," *American Psychologist* 65:3 (2010): 171–81.

sexual minorities or Latina sexual minorities. But this experience of “multiple aspects of identity” is quite salient when we look at the relationship between religious and sexual identities as experienced by Christians who are sorting out sexual identity conflicts. Unfortunately, the experience of Christian sexual minorities in particular is often overlooked or even derided within the gay community (and sometimes within the broader culture),⁴⁶ particularly when Christians do not integrate their experiences of same-sex sexuality into a gay identity. The multicultural movement’s literature refers to this as “intersectional invisibility,” the phenomenon in which those who have “intersecting identities” are “regarded as nonprototypical members of their constituent identity groups.”⁴⁷ Again, those who do not integrate their experiences into a gay identity are certainly nonprototypical today.

It is important to understand how a person comes to form a prototypical gay identity in light of their attractions to the same sex, and then to reflect on how Christians respond to the question of identity. To understand gay identity, it may be helpful to look at a parallel example that takes us outside of the controversies surrounding homosexuality. Let’s look at political identity—in other words, let’s consider how a person comes to form a political identity. Rogers Smith writes about how a person comes to experience their political identity as who they are as a person.⁴⁸ To explain it, he identified “ethically constitutive stories” as a central consideration. These refer to “a wide variety of accounts that present membership in a particular group as somehow intrinsic to who its members really are, because of traits that are imbued with ethical significance.”⁴⁹ Smith’s essay observes that there are both ethnic and civic aspects of identity. Ethnic aspects of identity are the “givens” of existence, while civic aspects are essentially principles a person believes in. Taken together, a person can form a political identity that reflects their sense of self or their sense of something that is intrinsic to who they consider themselves to be.

A gay identity label is a kind of ethically constitutive story insofar as integrating same-sex attractions into a gay identity provides a set of reference points for who one is and how to think about oneself. A gay identity relies on both ethnic and civic aspects, to borrow from the categories Smith uses. The ethnic aspects include experiences of same-sex attraction. For the most part, people do not choose to experience attraction to the same sex;⁵⁰ rather, they find

⁴⁶ For example, there was a *Will & Grace* episode (Girls, Interrupted, May 2, 2000) in which Jack falls for a leader of an ex-gay ministry, which is referred to as a “cult” and which ends with the members admitting their attempts to portray change are a charade.

⁴⁷ Sanchez-Hucles and Davis, “Women,” 177.

⁴⁸ Rogers M. Smith, “The Next Chapter of the American Story,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 69:44 (2003): B10–11.

⁴⁹ Rogers M. Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 64.

⁵⁰ The qualifier “For the most part” is to acknowledge the experience of some people who discuss volitional aspects tied to attraction and identity. For example, Sue Wilkinson, Professor of Feminist and Health Studies at Loughborough University, was quoted in an article as saying, “I was never unsure about my sexuality throughout my teens or 20s. I was a happy heterosexual and had no doubts. Then I changed, through political activity and

themselves with these experiences and often report awareness of feeling “different” at a young age and a sense of sexual or emotional attraction to the same sex at puberty. Sexual minorities also experience a civic aspect of identity in that the gay community offers them a compelling sense of who they are as a person in the form of what I have referred to elsewhere as a “gay script.”⁵¹

The process of identity development we have been discussing in this essay should be understood in light of this way of understanding gay identity. The sexual minority has experiences that set them apart from others; at least that is how they recall those experiences from childhood. They then find themselves attracted to the same sex at puberty, and these attractions can be both sexual and emotional. Of course, these experiences are run through a kind of filter; they have to be organized in a way that gives them meaning. Frankly, the church has not offered a particularly compelling vision for identity in light of the experiences of sexual minorities. Given the nature of the gay script, the sexual minority attributes their same-sex attraction to a gay identity by adopting the script and making the self-defining attribution, “I am gay.” This is an initial attribution that makes meaning out of the attractions they experience, and it also helps address the need for identity, which is an important developmental stage of adolescence.

Of course, not everyone integrates their experiences of same-sex attraction into a gay identity. This has been well documented in our research and by studies conducted by many others.⁵² This does not mean that they are heterosexual, but it does mean that they dis-identify with a gay identity. For example, when we asked about identity labels in a small study of Christian sexual minorities, one male interviewed shared how he had “no label” for his sexual identity:

I would say no label because I can’t really say I am straight because I am sexually attracted to men. Not homosexual or gay because I think those are identities and not fact.

feminism, spending time with women’s organisations. It opened my mind to the possibility of a lesbian identity.” http://women.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/women/relationships/article2002552.ece.

⁵¹ Mark A. Yarhouse, *Homosexuality and the Christian* (Grand Rapids: Bethany House, 2010), 49.

⁵² See also Michelle Wolkomir, *Be Not Deceived: The Sacred and Sexual Struggles of Gay and Ex-Gay Christian Men* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006); Michelle Wolkomir, “Wrestling with Angels of Meaning: The Revisionist Ideological Work of Gay and Ex-Gay Christian Men,” *Symbolic Interaction* 24 (2001): 407–24; Michelle Wolkomir, “Emotion Work, Commitment, and the Authentication of the Self: The Case of Gay and Ex-Gay Christian Support Groups,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 30:3 (2001): 305–34; L. G. Brzezinski, “Dealing with Disparity: Identity Development of Same-Sex Attracted/Gay Men Raised in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” (PhD diss., University of Utah, Salt Lake City, 2000); A. Lee Beckstead and Sue L. Morrow, “Mormon Clients’ Experiences of Conversion Therapy: The Need for a New Treatment Approach,” *The Counseling Psychologist* 32 (2004): 651–90.

I refuse to identify as homosexual/gay because I find my identity in Christ and those are not Christ-like identities.⁵³

When an identity outcome is *not* a “Christ-like” identity, it may be experienced as untenable to some followers of Christ. For some believers, a gay identity is just that, and so they attribute their attractions toward the same sex to other factors, such as the fall. To them, same-sex attraction is a temptation. In fact, this may be one of the most common attributions that undermines a gay script, and it may take a variety of forms. After all, the effects of the fall could be moderated by either nature or nurture, by biological predispositions, childhood experiences, environmental factors, and any number of other considerations.

I mentioned a moment ago that the church has not provided a compelling alternative account for sexual minorities to organize their experiences of attraction to the same sex. In fact, if this is true, it is rather remarkable that some sexual minorities have found a way to organize and make meaning out of their attractions in keeping with a traditional Christian sexual ethic. It is one thing to agree with a traditional Christian sexual ethic and to refrain from same-sex behavior; it is another thing to explore identity development and synthesis in light of that sexual ethic.

Let’s return to Chloe’s experience. Although Chloe had explored same-sex relationships in adolescence, she eventually came to the conclusion that same-sex behavior was against God’s revealed will for sexual expression. That decision and the decision that is in front of her every day as she makes choices in keeping with her values is difficult enough. However, she struggles with the identity aspect, too, in that many people close to her are readily willing to accept her as lesbian but do not quite know how to relate to her when that is not how she experiences or identifies herself—when her values contrast sharply with how others want to frame and organize the topic. It has been hard for Chloe to relate to people who are close to her from the gay community but who extend pity to her for choices they do not understand or with which they cannot fully empathize. It has also been hard for Chloe to relate to people in the Christian community who do not see her identifying as heterosexual or capable of offering that testimony of God’s work in her life. In some ways, embracing a gay or lesbian identity may be more accessible to some people and more easily understandable to the communities that would either support or condemn them.

In studies we conducted on sexual identity among Christian sexual minorities, we looked into the differences between groups of Christian sexual minorities who identified as gay and Christian sexual minorities who dis-identified with a gay identity.⁵⁴ Among the differences were that those who identified as gay were more likely to initially attribute their attractions to the same

⁵³ Mark A. Yarhouse, Heather L. Brooke, Paula Pisano, and Erica S. N. Tan, “Project Inner Compass: Young Adults Experiencing Sexual Identity Confusions,” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 24:4 (2005): 352–60.

⁵⁴ Mark A. Yarhouse and Erica S. N. Tan, *Sexual Identity Synthesis: Attributions, Meaning-Making, and the Search for Congruence* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004).

sex as signaling a gay identity. Of course, when a person thinks that they are gay, they are more likely to respond in ways that confirms that identity, such as seeking out other gay and lesbian persons, engaging in same-sex behavior, finding resources on gay and lesbian issues, and so on. Those who dis-identified with a gay identity were less likely to do these things.

Regarding multiple identity considerations, we conducted a small study of African-American Christian sexual minority males. We were looking at three identity considerations: racial identity, religious identity, and sexual identity.⁵⁵ When asked about the relationship between these three identities, most identified their Christian identity as primary. In elaborating on a Christian identity as primary or more salient, one person shared, “My Christian identity transcends every other identity and gives it focus and balance.”⁵⁶

This understanding of different ways of resolving identity conflicts can also be understood with reference to different experiences of congruence. A distinction can be made between *organismic* congruence and *telic* congruence.⁵⁷ Organismic congruence refers to taking cues from one’s own impulses as a guide to shaping identity and behavior. It presumes that such impulses are good and helpful resources in identity formation and personal fulfillment. Indeed, much of contemporary clinical psychology is unwittingly based upon such premises, particularly with the influence of Carl Rogers, the “quiet revolutionary” whose person-centered approach to counseling and therapy dominated the mental health landscape.

But organismic congruence is but one way of achieving congruence. Another way to achieve congruence is telic congruence. Telic congruence looks ahead to who one is becoming. It can consider design and purpose—both here and now and for the future—and it can be reflected in a person’s desire to lay aside or be disciplined in response to impulses in favor of another way of achieving a sense of self, purpose, and identity.

The connection to sexual identity conflicts is that sexual minorities may find many ways to resolve their conflicts and work toward a sense of congruence.⁵⁸ Some, perhaps most, may respond by assenting to the impulses they experience as moral compasses that point toward a

⁵⁵ Gender considerations are also reflected in this study, but we did not compare male and female experiences of African American sexual minorities. We will leave that study for another time.

⁵⁶ Mark A. Yarhouse, Stephanie Nowacki-Butzen, and D. Fredrica Brooks, “Multiple Identity Considerations among African American Christian Men Who Experience Same-Sex Attraction,” *Counseling and Values* 54 (2009): 25.

⁵⁷ William L. Hathaway, personal communication, November 2, 2009. This distinction is also discussed in the American Psychological Association’s *Task Force Report on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2009), 18.

⁵⁸ In an empirical study of various identity outcomes, Trista Carr (“Sexual Minority Christians: A Typology of Identity Outcomes and Tension Resolution” [PsyD diss., Regent University, Virginia Beach, Virginia, 2010]) reported on a convenience sample of 177 Christians who experience same-sex attraction and identified several identity outcomes, the most common of which were *identify as gay/lesbian/bisexual Christian* (50.1% of participants), *only identify as Christian-no sexual identification* (11.9%), and *never identify as LGB-only Christian identity* (10.2%). How common an identity outcome occurred may not be as instructive given that the data was derived from a convenience sample, but the range of identity outcomes is certainly noteworthy.

congruence that, in their experience, merely reflects who they are. Their identity (and subsequent behavior) merely recognizes the impulses they experience. Others, perhaps a minority today, may respond to their sexual identity conflicts by looking to who they are supposed to be, who they are becoming, and to form their identity around a congruence found in obedience to that sense of identity.

Of course, there are many ways people may respond to the conflict they experience between their Christian identity and their sexual identity. One of the more common responses to the conflict is to attempt to change sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual. This might take the form of a prayer in which the person asks God to remove their attraction to the same sex, much in the same way Paul asked God to remove his “thorn in the flesh” (2 Corinthians 12:7). In fact, many Christian sexual minorities have referenced that passage as instructive regarding how they ought to experience enduring or persistent attraction to the same sex. In any case, there have been a number of Christian ministries that have focused on helping people achieve “freedom from homosexuality through the power of Jesus Christ.”⁵⁹ This brings us to a discussion of trajectories that a person chooses for their life in light of their experience of same-sex attraction.

4. On Resolving Sexual Identity Conflicts and Life Trajectories

This section explores different ways to resolve sexual identity conflicts. I prefer to think about these resolutions as trajectories, recognizing that there are many trajectories a person can follow. I emphasize trajectory as saying something about direction or pathway rather than endpoint per se. I realize that trajectories are often followed precisely because of an expressed wish to reach an endpoint, but I have found that focusing exclusively on endpoints can at times detract from the importance of the direction itself.

4.1. Trajectory 1: Affirm Gay Identity as Central

One way to resolve sexual identity conflicts—let’s call it *Trajectory 1*—is to affirm a gay identity as central to who one is as a person. This is historically atypical, but it is common in contemporary culture.

One gay historian identifies four forms of homosexuality across cultures and throughout history.⁶⁰ The first is *age-structured homosexuality*. This is seen, for example, in age-related initiation ceremonies in some societies in New Guinea. The second form is *gender-reversed*

⁵⁹ <http://www.exodusinternational.org/> (accessed November 12, 2009). Exodus International closed in 2013 (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/20/exodus-international-shuts-down_n_3470911.html); however, other ministry networks have emerged (e.g., Restored Hope Network) and identified with this message.

⁶⁰ Gilbert Herdt, “Developmental Discontinuities and Sexual Orientation across Cultures,” in *Homosexuality/Heterosexuality: Concepts of Sexual Orientation* (ed. David P. McWhirter, S. A. Sanders, and J. M. Reinisch; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 224.

homosexuality. An example of this might be the North American Indian *berdache* (sometimes referred to as “two spirit” suggesting both a masculine and feminine spirit reside in the individual). The third form of homosexuality across cultures is *role-specialized homosexuality*. According to Herdt, an example of this can be found in the Chukchee shaman whose vision quests direct him to engage in same-sex behavior for a time. The fourth and final form of homosexuality can be seen in the *modern gay movement*. What is unique about this form of homosexuality, according to Herdt, is that it is a movement made possible by “disengaging sexuality from the traditions of family, reproduction, and parenthood.” The modern gay movement became a “social and historical likelihood” based upon this separation and in a cultural context of personal, sexual self-actualization.⁶¹ This self-actualization is organized around the self-defining attribution “I am gay.”

This first trajectory, then, involves locating oneself as a member of the modern gay movement.⁶² It entails private sexual identification as gay and typically a public sexual identity as gay. It embraces a gay identity as a normative outcome for sexual identity development among those who are attracted to the same sex. Same-sex behavior, then, is believed to be a normal and natural expression of identity, of who one is as a person.

4.2. Trajectory 2: Move from Homosexual to Heterosexual Orientation

Christians have often countered *Trajectory 1* with what we can refer to as *Trajectory 2*, which moves the person from a homosexual orientation (the basis of a gay identity) toward a heterosexual orientation (the basis of a heterosexual identity). From a Christian perspective, what are we to make of attempts to change sexual orientation? It is understandable that a person would consider attempting to change since Christians view heterosexuality as normative. At the same time, the assertion that heterosexuality is normative is no guarantee that sexual orientation can change.

As we parse out these different trajectories, I want to explore how they might respond to a key verse from Scripture that is often cited in these discussions: 1 Corinthians 6:11. After Paul lists a number of sinful behaviors, he declares, “And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”

It is important to avoid two extremes in the pastoral care or response to sexual orientation. The one is *arrogant optimism* that all persons with a homosexual orientation can

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² There are far more trajectories and identity outcomes than the three I discuss in this section. However, for the purposes of conveying the argument, I discuss these three broad trajectories to indicate possible ways to respond to same-sex sexuality and identity in terms of identity synthesis or achievement. This is similar to trajectory as “a choice in a journey,” to borrow from Peter Ould (<http://www.peter-ould.net/2007/04/19/you-and-me-together/>, accessed December 2, 2009). For a study and discussion of the many possible outcomes, see Carr, “Sexual Minority Christians.”

equally likely to change.⁶³ Those who operate from this perspective are more likely to be found among *Trajectory 2* persons and assert that anyone can change if they try hard enough or have enough faith. They view 1 Corinthians 6:11 as saying that a person used to be oriented to the same sex and that now they are oriented to the opposite sex.

The other extreme to avoid is *cynical pessimism*. This asserts that no one can experience change in sexual orientation and that those who have made that claim have lied. The cynical pessimist might view 1 Corinthians 6:11 as referring to other concerns, even other sexual concerns, but not to the gay relationship people have today. They do not see a reason to attempt change, and some might even go so far as to argue that such attempts go against a gay person's actual nature as gay, drawing upon recent revisionist understandings of Romans 1.

Another approach to the topic is *realistic biblical hope*. From this perspective, 1 Corinthians 6:11 describes a change, but we have no assurance that the change in question is a change in attraction or orientation; rather, the change may be a pattern of behavior that characterizes a person. Change may also occur at the level of attraction or orientation, but that is not considered typical or a necessary interpretation of the biblical passages.

Also, emphasizing change of sexual orientation can risk idolizing heterosexuality. What is more important to the Christian is not heterosexuality but a Christ-like life devoted to God (e.g., 2 Timothy 2:21; 1 Thessalonians 5:23).

4.3. Trajectory 3: Move away from Gay Identity

Another option, *Trajectory 3*, is to provide pastoral care in which the person moves away from a gay identity but does not focus on a movement away from a homosexual orientation to a heterosexual orientation. *Trajectory 3* focuses more holistically on sexual identity in contrast to *Trajectory 2*'s more narrow focus on orientation. It helps a person think about who they are and how they think of themselves and communicate who they are to others rather than limiting the discussion to arousal patterns and measures of sexual attraction.

It is interesting to think about what some Christians have said about their change of orientation experience. In our study of ninety-eight people attempting to change orientation through involvement in a Christian ministry affiliated with Exodus International, we asked the question, "How helpful has the ministry been so far?" Here are a few responses:

- It "made my walk with Christ closer."
- "It was very helpful to increase my relationship with God, making it closer."
- It got "my hands on materials that are helpful to read."
- "I need that intermediate place between church, between the rest of the world to be able to be honest . . . to have somewhere to be real."
- "They've helped me to find myself."

⁶³ This language comes from Richard E. Butman (personal communication) in reference to how the church deals with psychopathology. I've adapted it to our discussion of how the church responds to homosexuality and attempted change of sexual orientation.

Note that the areas of help have a lot to do with spiritual themes, such as walking closer with Christ or God and being able to be transparent. When it came to an open-ended question about how helpful their ministry has been so far, people did not offer a discussion of how the ministry was changing their sexual orientation.

Similarly, we asked participants to discuss areas that reflect real change. Here are a few of the responses they shared:

- “I’d say what it’s doing is reminding me of God’s intimate care and reminding me of his care for me—that he’s gentle and he will walk with me. I guess that’s basically saying that it’s okay to struggle.”
- “I haven’t acted out sexually in any way since I’ve been going. . . . It’s gotten under the surface, helped me see the reasons why I did the things I did.”
- “I think that God used it to let me know that I could struggle and still be accepted.”

What is involved in following this trajectory? I encourage people to carefully examine the language that they use to describe themselves and their experiences since I believe language can shape a person’s sense of identity:

Each of us is born into and assimilates preexisting forms of language in a culturally created linguistic system. In the process of socialization, we learn to speak in accepted ways and simultaneously to adopt the shared values and ideology of our language system. Thus, our words express the conventions, the symbols, the metaphors of our particular group. And we cannot speak in a language separate from that of our community.⁶⁴

The Christian sexual minority often has limited options for understanding his or her attraction to the same sex in light of his or her Christianity. From a narrative understanding, they might readily develop a “dominant story” or principal view of themselves and the world. For many Christian sexual minorities, it is that they are sinful or wrong for their sexuality or sexual impulses. From this theoretical perspective, the person internalizes a dominant discourse from Christianity that shapes their sense of themselves as a sinful person.

Some Christian sexual minorities create a sense of identity around the common meanings or connotations associated with “gay” as an identity label. They are gay Christians, and they take different positions that they view as justifying a different interpretation of key passages in Scripture, overarching themes in Scripture, and so on to argue that same-sex behavior is neutral and must be judged like any heterosexual behavior as to whether it is moral or immoral (such as whether it occurs in a loving relationship, etc.). In one online community called gayChristian.net, they refer to themselves as “Side A” Christians. They do not believe that same-sex attraction is a

⁶⁴ Dorothy Stroh Becvar and Raphael J. Becvar, *Family Therapy: A Systemic Integration* (6th ed.; Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2006), 93.

temptation to sin or something to struggle with or against; rather, they are “those who are in gay relationships or hope to be someday.”⁶⁵

Other Christian sexual minorities do not create a sense of identity around the common meanings or connotations associated with “gay” as an identity label. They are also gay Christians, but they seem to mean something more like being “gay” reflects the fact that they are attracted to the same sex. GayChristian.net refers to them as “Side B” Christians, who “view their same-sex attractions as a temptation, and strive to live celibate lives.” To some, this might mean that these gay Christians are changing the common meaning of the word “gay” in that they reject behavioral expression of their attractions for religious reasons. But to these Christian sexual minorities, they share a common sense of experience with members of the gay community, and the use of the word “gay” (as a self-defining attribution) is an honest account of their sexual attractions and reflects the resonance they feel with the gay community *at that level*.⁶⁶

Still others reject a gay identity label altogether. This may be the more common response among sexual minorities who do not endorse same-sex relationships and the theological and biblical studies that are cited to support such behavior and/or relationships. These individuals are sometimes referred to as *ex-gays* or *post-gays*. Exodus International popularized the word *ex-gay*, although there was movement away from that designation by some in leadership in the year prior to the closing of the ministry organization. Post-gay has been popular among some Christian sexual minorities, including Peter Ould:

Post-gay isn’t an ontological statement, it’s a vectorial statement. For those uninitiated in the deeper arcane magicks of mathematics, a vector is simply a description of a direction and magnitude. It describes a movement, not a position (which is ontology). Post-gay then is less about being straight or gay and rather about a choice of a journey.⁶⁷

In our own work studying similar individuals, we used the more descriptive (but somewhat clunky) language of “dis-identifying” with a gay identity. What these terms and others seem to convey is a rejection of the label “gay” by either not being gay, not identifying as gay, or moving beyond gay as a personal identity label. In keeping with Ould’s sentiment, it is primarily a discussion of life trajectory or, in his words, a *choice of a journey*.

⁶⁵ <http://gaychristian.net/> (accessed November 18, 2010).

⁶⁶ A recent example of a gay Christian who believes God calls him to abide by the traditional Christian sexual ethic is Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010). By rejecting the meaning of gay identity in the common vernacular, some might even say that this group of gay Christians are involved in *excorporation* (as contrasted with *incorporation*), by which is meant a group speaks “*our* meaning with *their* language.” See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “What is Everyday Theology?” in *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Charles A. Anderson, and Michael J. Sleasman; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 56. Vanhoozer here introduces the reader to John Fiske, who is the person who introduces the language of “excorporation” and originally contrasts it with “incorporation.”

⁶⁷ <http://www.peter-ould.net/2007/04/19/you-and-me-together/> (accessed November 18, 2010).

In each of these steps away from the common meanings associated with a gay identity label, we want to consider how Christians understand sexual identity labeling in light of a broader understanding of identity labeling, which is tied to locating and centering the self. One way Christians have understood labeling and identity is that they have recognized the human tendency to have a wrongly centered self.⁶⁸ This comes at least in part from passages such as Galatians 2:19–20, where Paul writes to the churches in Galatia about the believers' life in Christ: "For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." Mirslav Volf points out that in Galatians 2:19–20 Paul writes about a wrongly centered self and the need to be "re-centered." The act or process of re-centering involves a shift away from self and toward a more salient identity in Christ.

In the area of sexual identity, a truly Christian understanding begins with recognizing that there can be a "diffusion of the self" in which the person passively allows a gay identity to supersede a Christian identity. (In all areas of life, there is a tendency to passively allow other interests and experiences to supersede a Christian identity, so this should not be thought of as exclusive to the sexual identity discussions.) This passive diffusion of the self is more likely to occur in cultural contexts that support the concept of organismic congruence (see §3 above). Organismic congruence assumes that the preferred outcome resides in awareness and acceptance of what the organism experiences itself to be. Locate this assumptive framework—which is implicitly supported within the broader Western culture and in its mental health and related institutions—within a broader culture of individualism and personal fulfillment (self-actualization), and it comes as no surprise that such congruence will be seen as the normative outcome for identity resolution. This makes "de-centering" more challenging because the cultural context makes passive diffusion of the self that much more likely.

The Christian would consider first "de-centering" the self and then "re-centering" the self. This does not entail rejecting the self; rather, according to the Volf, "re-centering establishes the most proper and unassimilated center that allows the self to stand out against person and institution which may threaten to smother it."⁶⁹ The Christian sexual minority may often end up navigating the process of re-centering the self in the face of the gay community *and* in the face of their particular church community, particularly if the former suggests that the only authentic identity is *gay* and if the latter suggests that the only authentic identity is *straight*.

Although there is no one pathway we know of for this process of de-centering and re-centering the self, let me offer a few observations about what it might entail at a very practical level. The first consideration is to resist the drift toward isolation when struggling with sexual identity concerns. This is a common experience, as many people in the church are either uncomfortable with the subject or may be communicating either rejection or acceptance in ways

⁶⁸ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 71.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

that do not help the Christian sexual minority walk out a commitment to faithful obedience to God's word.

The next consideration is to recognize that same-sex attraction is part of the person's experience but not the central or defining aspect of their identity. This is a move toward de-centering the self. The three-tier distinction between attraction, orientation, and identity made earlier provides the intellectual space for exploring identity and ultimately de-centering the self. Indeed, here's how one person in a study we conducted wrote about the difference between sexual orientation and identity:

Orientation indicates that there is some sort of natural bend to me towards homosexuality . . . identification is what sort of label are you placing on yourself. . . . I believe that you can have a predisposition towards something. . . . There may have been things in my life that moved me towards homosexuality making that an easier leap than others. That would be more or less an orientation and through that, I've had certain things happen in my life . . . that oriented me towards homosexual attitudes, and beliefs. That orientation then led to identification. It was like well . . . okay I am feeling this way, and believing these things, that must mean I'm homosexual. These two questions together they are not really two separate issues they are tied together. Your orientation can lead to identification.⁷⁰

De-centering the self may involve describing one's experiences of attraction or one's orientation (the difference between same-sex attraction and orientation being the amount, degree, and persistence of attraction over time) rather than forming an identity around one's experiences of attraction or one's orientation.

To re-center the self is to develop one's sense of identity around other aspects of who they are as a person, such as being born male or female. These might be other "givens" of existence or what were referred to earlier as the *ethnic* aspects of identity, or these might be roles, such as mother or father, wife or husband. These aspects may include what might be called civic aspects of identity or commitments, beliefs, and values a person holds that shape their identity, such as important religious or faith commitments, such as cultivating one's identity "in Christ" as central and most salient. In fact, this might be the hallmark of a re-centered self for the believer; that is, they move away from a passive subscription to a competing identity by recognizing the "diffusion of self" that can or has occurred. Then they re-center the self by experiencing their "in Christ" identity as central and defining.

What happens to a Christian sexual minority's sexuality in a re-centered self? We are not talking about a loss of sexuality or diminished sexuality. Nor are we talking about a sexuality that is transformed from one orientation to another. That is a separate matter. When this re-centering begins to occur, the person can then think of their sexuality as they would so much of their experience: they begin to think about what it means to be a good steward of their sexuality and its expression in relationships.

⁷⁰ From the author's files.

Stewardship entails “the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one’s care.”⁷¹ It is a common theme found throughout the New Testament that Christians are instructed to be responsible stewards of what they have been given (see Malachi 3:6–12; Matthew 25:14–30; Luke 19:13; 1 Corinthians 6:2). What is entrusted to the care of the Christian sexual minority is what is entrusted to all Christians. Among what is entrusted to the Christian’s care are resources, such as money, but also family relationships, time, and, of course, sexuality and its expression. Everything that Christians have has been given to them for the express purpose of bringing honor and glory to God. This assertion will no doubt be completely foreign to those steeped in contemporary Western culture, a culture of not only individualism but also of personal ownership (and, some would say, entitlement). But the Christian stands in contrast to such ownership/entitlement in all areas. None of it is ours; none of it is something we own or even have a right to.

We turn our attention now to an additional challenge to a re-centered self. That is, we want to explore a theology of sexual identity and at least a partial theodicy or a theology of evil. This is a theological understanding that has to inform the Christian’s understanding of the fall and of pain and suffering.

5. An Additional Challenge to a Re-Centered Self: Trusting in God’s Good Character

One of the greatest theological, philosophical, and, ultimately, pastoral challenges is how to understand, account for, and respond to the evil that exists in the world. Of the many evils that exist in the world, we need to discuss and come to a better understanding of pain and suffering. There is no consensus as to why pain and suffering exists, and major world religions offer varying accounts. Christianity, too, offers different perspectives on suffering, with no one explanation as the only account.

The difficulties surrounding homosexuality require reflecting on a theology of sexual identity. What does Christianity have to say to the pain and suffering that sexual minorities face, at least those sexual minorities who choose to live within the traditional Christian sexual ethic discussed in this essay?

I suspect that one of the reasons that many people promise change in sexual orientation is that they have a difficult time with a theology in which God sovereignly allows someone to experience and struggle with an enduring or besetting condition, particularly if that person believes from their experience that they are “born this way.” This touches on both the sovereignty of God and on the question of causes. First, when it comes to a Christian understanding of same-sex sexuality, the assertion is not *God made me this way*, but rather *God sovereignly allowed me to experience same-sex attraction*. This reminds believers that their experiences, circumstances, and struggles do not surprise God. So a Christian’s experiences of

⁷¹ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Stewardship>.

same-sex attraction do not surprise God; but that is not the same thing as saying that God makes a person this way or that God's intent in allowing same-sex attraction means that it ought to become the basis upon which to form an identity.

Second, the question of causes is important. §1.2 above discusses some of what we know and do not know about the causes of a homosexual orientation. There is much we do not know at this time. But the causes are likely a combination of factors from both nature and nurture. These contributing factors are not determinative, like eye color or hair color is determined. Rather, the role of biological antecedents may be that they provide a "push" in the direction of homosexuality for some persons. Other factors must also be in place, and these, too, vary in relative weight from person to person. Does this mean that the person is "born this way"? This is not an easy question to answer with a simple Yes or No. Rather, the answer may entail *both* Yes and No if we can come to a better understanding of what this may mean. *Yes*, in the sense that people do not choose to experience same-sex attraction; they "find themselves" experiencing attraction to the same sex. *No*, in the sense that the pathway to developing a homosexual orientation likely involves many different contributing factors from both nature and nurture, from both biology and the environment. As a person grows up through adolescence and into young adulthood, they have more choices to make that may reinforce experiences of attraction and that might begin to connect attractions with identity in a way that is a rather recent phenomenon. In this sense, it is no surprise to me that a person would report that they feel they were "born this way," particularly as I do not see them making a conscious choice regarding attractions. As I have suggested, people do have choices to make about identity and behavior.

What are we dealing with then? We are discussing a world in which a person "finds themselves" experiencing attraction to the same sex. This attraction is the result of several factors that likely vary in relative weight from person to person. The attractions occur in a relatively small percentage of persons, say 4–6%, and only about 2–3% would say that their attractions are persistent and enduring enough to be considered an orientation toward the same sex. Does the fact that such attractions occur in nature mean that they are from God? Has God made them this way? Again, that is certainly a conclusion that some people say that they have come to, but other sexual minorities reject this reasoning. Instead, they argue that their attractions are the result of the fall, that they would not have had attractions to the same sex apart from a fallen world—much like the person suffering from depression would not contend with lower levels of the neurotransmitters serotonin or dopamine that would contribute to bouts of depression. These low levels are not due to the personal sin of the individual who deals with depression. However, they exist and would not have existed apart from a world in which the fall affects every aspect of creation, including neurotransmitters. People who suffer from depression have choices to make about how they cope with and deal with their tendency toward depression, and the church can become a community that aids them in their struggle in this area.

The Christian sexual minority experiences same-sex attractions. We have little idea as to the specific causal mechanisms for same-sex attractions or a homosexual orientation. These attractions feel "natural" in the sense that the person does nothing apparently to foster them

initially. These attractions may or may not diminish over time. On average, females, more so than males, are thought to have a more fluid experience of their sexual attractions. Some people may experience a significant diminishing of attraction, but most do not appear to experience that change, at least not a categorical change from a homosexual orientation to a heterosexual orientation. So the attractions may not diminish substantively over time. If these experiences are not celebrated as an expression of God's desire for sexual diversity, as some would argue, how do Christian sexual minorities understand their experiences in light of theology?

Any alternative to "God's desire for sexual diversity" will likely begin with some acknowledgment that this is "not the way it's supposed to be"⁷² (see Romans 8:18–25). This is a broader and more fundamental question of why God in his sovereignty might allow circumstances in which people experience pain and suffering. As Stackhouse observes, some of that pain is caused by the choices we make.⁷³ However, we have already admitted that the pain for the sexual minority does not appear to be a result of their choices. They find themselves with impulses or attractions that they are then told not to act on as the expression falls outside of God's intention for sexual intimacy.

The Christians I have known who have come to peace about a theology of sexual identity have been able to trust God's character (Jeremiah 29:11; Romans 3:21–26; Hebrews 12:10). In other words, they experience God as trustworthy because of who God is, and they have faith in what God has for them in their circumstances, even when those circumstances include attraction to the same sex that they believe they are not to consummate in terms of genital sexual behavior.

One way in which Stackhouse discusses theodicy or at least what he calls a *partial* theodicy is to conclude after some philosophical analysis that the world we live in is "the right sort of world for our actual condition: a world that shows us our need and provides opportunities to grow up into personal maturity."⁷⁴ I will not be able to do justice to the arguments in this area of scholarship, but suffice it to say that the world in which we live is a world in which we come to a better understanding of our own limitations personally and as human beings. We live in a world in which we are capable of growing into someone better and more mature than we were previously; God may have a higher purpose in having a world like the one in which we live rather than a world free from such possible growth and maturity.

Stackhouse's account reminds me of a letter I received several years ago from a family member that expressed similar themes. In the letter the writer notes the connections between the troubles we face and endurance and endurance's relationship to faith. The troubles we face are circumstances that are tied to transcendent purposes to the extent that they provide an opportunity to develop endurance (the capacity to last, to withstand hardship), which ultimately

⁷² This phrase is from Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

⁷³ John G. Stackhouse Jr., *Can God Be Trusted? Faith and the Challenge of Evil* (2nd ed.; Downers Grove: IVP, 2009).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 176.

can result in strengthening faith and Christian character (in this context, Christian character is, in short, Christlikeness). To touch on the kind of world we live in, the “right sort of world for our actual condition,”⁷⁵ the author of the letter writes,

God builds into the Christian life aspects of character development which would *not* be possible (I think) outside of a fallen world. Here we *must* face situations in which we are *genuinely* tempted to throw in the towel, so that we can also have the *genuine* opportunity to press on, and in pressing on we gain a victory (even a small victory) of faith, and in doing that we develop our own Christian history, our personal Christian memory, which is an integral part of our individual character. We can see what we’ve been through, and how God brought us through it, and we are ready to face whatever happens next, not because of ourselves, but because of what God already has done for us, and in us.⁷⁶

This message applies to all Christians living in the kind of world we live in—a world in which we face troubles (James 1:2–4). Is it possible that same-sex attraction is a unique difficulty or trouble that calls forth a level of faith and endurance that can actually build or strengthen Christian character in the life of the believer who is dealing with it? My experience as a psychologist working with Christians who are navigating sexual identity conflicts is that, yes, Christians can and do grow in their capacity to trust God, in their faith in God as a transcendent being, and in their own Christlikeness or sense of Christian character over time.

Where people seem to struggle the most is when they respond to a cynical view of God that portrays God as cruel for what is characterized as essentially a “set up”—that Christians who experience same-sex attractions are “set up” (by God, because of his sovereignty and omnipotence) because they have same-sex attractions but are told not to act on them at least in terms of genital sexual behavior. The degree to which people struggle with this view has a lot to do with how much we value complete genital sexual expression and a kind of democratization of sexual self-actualization in which all people are said to have equal access to realize or actualize our sexual potential in the form of genital or behavioral expression. Any circumstances that appear to mitigate against that sexual potential are called into question, even if that has historically been understood as a Christian sexual ethic that is tied to transcendent meanings and purposes that preclude the possibility of genital expression between members of the same sex.

Ultimately, the cynicism directed toward God and the challenge issued to God is one that centers on his character. This is not exclusively the purview of same-sex attraction and sexual identity; rather, a theology of evil, the fall, and suffering raises critical questions about the character of God. These questions are raised in the contexts of war, genocide, cancer, schizophrenia, and other concerns.⁷⁷ One significant difference between some of these concerns

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Author’s files.

⁷⁷ See Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Sin: Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be* (ed. D. A. Carson; Christ on Campus Initiative; Deerfield, IL: Carl F. H. Henry Center for Theological Understanding, 2010), <http://tgc-documents.s3.amazonaws.com/ccf/Pantinga.pdf>.

and same-sex attraction that is personally distressing is that in contemporary culture a high-profile gay community exists that provides a sense of identity and community to persons who experience same-sex attraction, thus challenging traditional understandings of theodicy as it relates to same-sex sexuality. Put differently, the topic of sexual identity has sharpened the question of theology for our culture today, as gay identity has become the fulcrum to challenge and question who God is and what he is calling people to in terms of faithfulness to his revealed will.

As we have been discussing, it is important to understand the place of sexuality and sexual expression in the life of the believer. We have also observed how this is not a discussion that is limited to the sexual minority. Indeed, the question of a theology of sexual identity also touches on how the church understands and values marriage and singleness. This is perhaps one of the most overlooked areas of scholarship, particularly in Protestant Christianity, that has great bearing on discussions regarding homosexuality. We turn our attention now to this topic so that we can expand our understanding of the possibilities for Christians who experience same-sex attraction.

6. Homosexuality, Singleness, and Celibacy

The topic of a Christian understanding of homosexuality and a Christian and pastoral response to homosexuality is related in some ways to a Christian view of singleness. There is a need particularly among Protestant Christians to revisit our view of singleness and how we communicate what it is we value in the local church. If most of our programming is geared toward marriages and families in ways that communicate a devaluing of the single state, we will (perhaps unintentionally) convey to the person who contends with same-sex attractions that they must attain heterosexuality in order to find a spiritual home in the Body of Christ.

Recent scholarship on a Christian understanding of singleness suggests that marriage alone cannot convey all that there is to know and experience of God's nature. Lisa McMinn illustrates this well:

The fullness of God's nature cannot be captured in one human who bears God's image, or in marriage as a model of God's love for the Church, or in one of Christianity's traditional emphases on evangelism or holiness or contemplation. God's nature is most fully represented in the diversity of community—male, females, married, single, Protestant, Catholic, young, old Asian, African. We are incapable as individuals of carrying or experiencing the fullness of God.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Lisa Graham McMinn, *Sexuality and Holy Longing: Embracing Intimacy in a Broken World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 68; quoted in Christine A. Colón and Bonnie E. Field, *Singled Out: Why Celibacy Must Be Reinvented in Today's Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009), 167.

What is gained in singleness that is accessible to the Christian who experiences same-sex attractions? One experience that is gained, according to Colón and Field, is to come to a deeper understanding of celibacy as a spiritual discipline “in which we train our minds and bodies by placing them in subjection to God’s commands.”⁷⁹ Such an understanding has historical roots and essentially reflects the significance of being intentional about the spiritual benefits gained in practicing celibacy. If spiritual disciplines are intentional acts or experiences that are intended to draw us closer to God or to cultivate certain Christian character traits over time, then celibacy might be viewed as such and then transform some of the stigma currently associated with it.

Colón and Field go on to share the unique Christian considerations on sex and relationships that is found in the decision to frame celibacy as spiritual discipline:

Thinking of celibacy as a spiritual discipline helps us to understand the value of controlling sexual desires in the midst of a world in which this practice seems at best ridiculous and at worst dangerous. We are not giving up sex because we think it is evil or because we wish to punish ourselves or because we desire to prove that we are more holy than our sexually active brothers and sisters. We refrain from sexual activity because it helps us to place God, sex, and Christian community in the right perspective. Celibacy is a way of enacting through our bodies our belief that God, not us, is in control. It reminds us that he desires us as Christians to build relationships with others that are not based solely on sexual attraction nor on biological connections but rather on our communion with him and our concern for our neighbors.⁸⁰

This idea of acknowledging God as in control or in charge or sovereign has been seen among Christian who dis-identify with a gay identity. In our research comparing experiences of Christians who experience same-sex attraction and who identify as gay and those who do not identify as gay, we reported that some of those who did not identify as gay felt that identifying as gay and worshipping God out of that gay identity was not being authentic to what God intended for them in terms of a more central identity in Christ. Similarly, some participants shared how they felt God did not intend for them to have a gay identity but to trust God as sovereign over their same-sex sexuality.⁸¹

A second and somewhat related consideration gained in singleness is that “Christian singles often must deal with the issue of Christian vocation in a much more direct way as well.”⁸² According to the authors, if the primary vocation of married Christians is to raise the next generation within the Body of Christ, the Christian single explores vocation differently, with prayerful consideration for “the unique plan that God has for us in the development of his church

⁷⁹ Colón and Field, *Singled Out*, 210.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 210–11.

⁸¹ Mark A. Yarhouse and Erica S. N. Tan, *Sexual Identity Synthesis: Attributions, Meaning-Making and the Search for Congruence* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004).

⁸² *Ibid.*, 211.

and the spreading of his gospel beyond the walls of the local church congregation.”⁸³ It is not so much that single Christians do not participate in important ways in bringing the next generation of Christian along, but they do so in a different way, and these differences are sometimes unique and varied and should be valued in the life of the local church and framed as vocation.

Some Christians who experience same-sex attraction but do not form an identity around their same-sex sexuality see their experience as unique and an opportunity to truly minister to others out of the insights they have gained. This does not have to be high-profile or even specific to same-sex sexuality, but it may be that out of this unique experience a ministry is formed based on care, empathy, and deep Christian maturity.

Another relevant reflection brings the Christian back to community, specifically the church. When Christians discuss love and intimacy with one another, there is a sense in which we say that genital sexual acts are not the most important expression of love, which has implications for singles, whether they experience same-sex attraction or not. Even when genital acts are experienced in the context of heterosexual marriage, they are still not the most important expression of love. Rather, the most important expression of love and intimacy in the life of the Christian is meant to be experienced in Christian community, in the church. Wesley Hill similarly concludes, “One of the most surprising discovering I made . . . is that the New Testament views the church—rather than marriage—as the primary place where human love is best expressed and experienced.”⁸⁴ Unfortunately, we know that the church often comes up short on being a community that reflects genuine love and in which followers of Christ can experience true intimacy. But this is our charge, and the church’s success in reflecting love and intimacy may make the difference in how people respond to the idea of walking out a life trajectory of faithfulness to God in sexuality and sexual expression.

7. Conclusion

By closing this paper on a discussion of singleness, I do not want to suggest that Christians who experience same-sex attraction cannot experience some reduction in it over time, as that has been reported by some who have had that as their goal. Some find that they are able to marry heterosexually.⁸⁵ However, the church would do well to expand the vision of the Christian who is navigating sexual identity issues beyond the expectation of complete heterosexuality or the expectation of heterosexual marriage, even if a modest number of believers do experience a

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Hill, *Washed and Waiting*, 111.

⁸⁵ Mark A. Yarhouse, Lisa M. Pawlowski, and Erica S. N. Tan, “Intact Marriages in Which One Partner Dis-Identifies with Experiences of Same-Sex Attraction,” *American Journal of Family Therapy* 31 (2003): 369–88; Mark A. Yarhouse and Robin L. Seymore, “Intact Marriages in Which One Partner Dis-Identifies with Experiences of Same-Sex Attraction: A Follow-up Study,” *American Journal of Family Therapy* 34 (2006): 1–11; Mark A. Yarhouse, Christine C. Gow, and Edward B. Davis, “Intact Marriages in Which One Partner Experiences Same-Sex Attraction: A Five-Year Follow-up Study,” *The Family Journal* 17:4 (2009): 329–34.

more significant shift. Many others will not experience the same degree of shift, and a Christian's measure of spiritual depth and maturity does not hinge on the eradication of same-sex attraction or an increase in attraction to the opposite sex. If a believer does not experience heterosexuality or a significant reduction in homosexual attractions, he or she has much to experience in the life of the church and in a personal walk with God. For all believers, single and married, heterosexual and homosexual, there is a more fundamental consideration: that we live our lives faithfully before God, committing ourselves to him, and growing through the Holy Spirit's work in our lives, to greater Christ-likeness. We do this in the context of our daily struggles, becoming better stewards of our sexuality, trusting God and growing in faith, recognizing that we can see our lives in the context of God's sovereign and redemptive plan.

Annotated Bibliography:

Colon, Christine A., and Bonnie E. Field. *Singled Out: Why Celibacy Must Be Reinvented in Today's Church*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009. This is a one of the best contemporary resources on a Christian view of celibacy. The authors offer a very insightful, encouraging perspective on what it could mean to be single and rooted in Christian community.

Hill, Wesley. *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010. A gay Christian compellingly recounts his own journey in living faithfully before God.

Jones, Stanton L., and Mark A. Yarhouse. *Ex-Gays? A Longitudinal Study of Religiously Mediated Change in Sexual Orientation*. Downers Grove: IVP, 2007. This is a longitudinal study of attempted change in sexual orientation through involvement in Christian ministries. It was written to challenge cynical pessimism about change ever occurring, but it should not be cited to support arrogant optimism that change always occurs or that categorical change is likely.

Jones, Stanton, L., and Mark A. Yarhouse. *Homosexuality: The Use of Scientific Research in the Church's Moral Debate*. Downers Grove: IVP, 2000. This reviews research in four key areas: the prevalence of homosexuality, the origins of sexual orientation, whether it is a mental disorder, and whether it can change. We look at the use (and misuse) of science in church debates about homosexuality.

Marin, Andrew. *Love Is an Orientation: Elevating the Conversation with the Gay Community*. Downers Grove: IVP, 2009. This provides helpful principles for Christians who seek to engage people in the gay community by staying in relationship and finding areas of mutual understanding and common ground while resisting the tendency to polarize.

Via, Dan O., and Robert A. J. Gagnon. *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003. This is a clear and concise exchange around key verses from liberal and conservative Christian perspectives.

Yarhouse, Mark, A. *Homosexuality and the Christian: A Guide for Parents, Pastors, and Friends*. Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2010. This refocuses the discussion around sexual identity rather than orientation. It ultimately emphasizes identity and sanctification rather than self-actualization.

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