

Same-Sex Attraction

Study Committee Report

INTRODUCTION

With the normalizing of same-sex sexual activity and relationships in our society, the PCA encounters new and challenging questions regarding same-sex attraction and the appropriate pastoral response. While there is agreement on the sinfulness of same-sex relationships within the denomination, opinions diverge on certain theological and pastoral matters surrounding same-sex attraction.

In order to uphold sound doctrine in our pastoral practice and to minister compassionately to those experiencing same-sex attraction, we hope to provide a helpful guide to assist in navigating these contested issues.

QUESTIONS

1. What are the origins of same-sex attraction?

In western culture, it is commonly assumed that same-sex attracted individuals are born with a fixed same-sex orientation.¹ Under this assumption, same-sex orientation is presumed natural and accepted as an appropriate expression of human sexuality. Given this cultural environment, to discourage same-sex sexual behaviors appears cruel and inhumane. However, the reduction of sexual attraction solely to genetic factors leaves too little space for the other biological, psychological, sociological, and spiritual factors involved in sexual attraction.

Whatever the origins of same-sex attraction, our theological understanding of humanity's fall accounts for the existence of this attraction in that sin pervasively corrupts both our minds, bodies, and social environments (Genesis 3.14-4.26; Romans 1.28-32; 8.19-23). In Scripture, same-sex activity is one outcome, among many others, of humanity's decision to exchange the glory of the immortal God for images of created things (Romans 1.22-23). As a result of this rebellion, God gave us over to the lusts of our hearts (Romans 1.24), to dishonoring our bodies (Romans 1.24), to exchanging natural relations (Romans 1.26-27), and to debased minds that lead to all manner of sin and unrighteousness (Romans 1.28-31). It is essential to note that 'natural relations' were exchanged for those that betray nature because we 'exchanged the truth about God for a lie' (Romans 1.24-27). In other words, disordered sexualities followed the disordering of our relationship with God. When we forsook the knowledge of God, we polluted and confused God's design for our sexuality as well. Therefore, same-sex attraction and sexual activity, along with all other forms of sexual immorality, are results of Adam's fall, not God's creational design.

Furthermore, as a result of our broken physical bodies and fractured social environments, all humanity possesses dispositions of various types in their sinful nature to various sins.

¹ Sociological surveys indicate that a set of the population—roughly 6% of men and 4.5% of women—report feeling attracted to people of both sexes. Another smaller subset—2% of men and 1% of women—report experiencing strong and persistent attraction to members of the same sex. See: Yarhouse, Mark, *Homosexuality and the Christian* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2010).

However, such dispositions do not justify sin. For example, an adult raised in a volatile home from a family with a history of anger problems will easily inherit a disposition towards a hot temper. Given such family history, the behavior is understandable, but not justifiable. For Christians, the norms for all of life, including human sexual behavior, lie in God's Word, not human experience.

Additionally, it is important to note that the Bible does not ascribe identity to a human being on the basis of a particular sexual inclination, lust, or behavior. As Christians, we can recognize a persistent pattern of temptations and behaviors with a descriptive label, like alcoholic or same-sex attracted, but these labels in no way designate an identity. God alone, in his sovereign right, confers identity on human beings when he creates them in his image (Genesis 1.26-27) and renews that work in redemption (2 Corinthians 5.17; Colossians 3.10). Human sexual expression is a gift from God for his images to enjoy, but it does not confer identity on his images. To concede that our sexual inclinations and actions confer identity submits to Freudian presuppositions, not God's. On Freud's account of reality, sexuality equals identity. But, as Christians, we resist this reductionist ontology. God alone, as our Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer, defines our being (Acts 17.28). Here, Christian theology must resist secular thought by refusing secular ontology.

2. Is same-sex attraction a disability that afflicts certain Christians?

Since some Christians report experiencing unwelcomed same-sex attraction, it has become popular to consider same-sex attraction a physical disability. In a pastoral letter, C. S. Lewis advocated something like this position by writing:

The disciples were not told why (in terms of efficient cause) the man was born blind (John 9:1-3): only the final cause, that the works of God should be made manifest in him. This suggests that in homosexuality, as in every other tribulation, those works can be made manifest: i.e. that every disability conceals a vocation, if only we can find it, which will 'turn the necessity to glorious gain.' Of course, the first step must be to accept any privations which, if so disabled, we can't lawfully get. The homosexual has to accept sexual abstinence just as the poor man has to forego otherwise lawful pleasures because he would be unjust to his wife and children if he took them.²

While Lewis' advice possesses wise pastoral counsel about discovering a vocation from within our particular sufferings, it seems appropriate to challenge whether it is appropriate to approach same-sex attraction as a disability. Disabilities, like being blind, deaf, or lame, are not sinful in themselves, and there is no moral conflict due to the disability necessarily. However, same-sex attraction represents an inclination towards a sinful behavior that emerges from the sinful nature (James 1.14-15). To refer to same-sex attraction as a disability can become hazardous in that the affected individual cannot dismiss the moral conflict that exists between their attractions and God's will. To consider same-sex attraction a disability could give an individual the permission to do so. Given this, it seems wise to avoid referring to same-sex attraction as a disability.

² Lewis, C.S., *A Severe Mercy* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2009).

3. *What is the relationship between sexual temptation towards a member of the same sex and sexual lust? Is the temptation itself sexual immorality?*

In addressing the relationship between temptation and sexual immorality, it is important to affirm that sexual temptation is not sexual sin. Even though it is difficult for fallen humans to identify the precise boundary between temptation and sin, Scripture mandates that we distinguish these two events. To conflate the two ignores the reality of God's gracious promises of deliverance to those experiencing temptation (1 Corinthians 10.13; Hebrews 2.18) and the sinless obedience of Jesus Christ in the face of temptation (Matthew 4.1-11; Hebrews 4.15). Christians can be confronted with an opportunity to sin and, by the grace of God, resist the temptation and pursue obedience. This applies to all manner of sexual temptations, including sexual temptation towards a member of the same sex (Genesis 39.7-12; 1 Corinthians 6.18; 2 Timothy 2.22).

That said, it is important to recognize that temptation is always an inducement to do wrong (1 Corinthians 7.5; Galatians 6.1; 1 Timothy 6.9; James 1.14-15). While the experience of temptation does not incur guilt, the temptation *itself* is not neutral. Temptation entices the Christian to transgress God's will. In our sinful weakness, there is a short distance between sexual temptation and lust (Matthew 5.27-28). Therefore, it is wise to exercise caution and vigilance with all temptations to sexual immorality and to set our hearts and minds to what is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, and praiseworthy (Philippians 4.8; Colossians 3.1-4).

Furthermore, for Christians, our sinful nature, or flesh, has been crucified in Jesus Christ (Romans 6.6-7; Galatians 5.24), but yet our corrupt nature also remains within us (Galatians 5.17; *WCF* 6.5; 13.1-2). There is a 'a continual and irreconcilable war' raging between the flesh and the Spirit (1 Peter 2.11; *WCF* 13.2). Given this, we must frankly recognize the difficulties we encounter with sexual immorality in the form of impure sexual lusts, desires, fantasies, affections, and physical actions. So, while the Christian moves from temptation into *actual* sin when an action, or motion, takes place, it is important to affirm that such 'motions,' from their first stirrings in the heart, are sin (*WCF* 6.5).³ The distinction between temptation and sinful action should not be used to shield sinful desires and affections. By his grace and the power of the Spirit, God calls us to put such things to death (Ephesians 5.3-5; Colossians 3.5).

4. *Is it sinful to be sexually attracted to a member of the same sex?*

Yes, it is sinful to be attracted sexually to a member of the same sex. Sexual desire towards a member of the same sex indicates that an individual has crossed the boundary between temptation and sin, engaging in sexual lust. As codified in the Westminster Standards, same-sex sexual lust falls within the 'unnatural lusts' condemned by God (Romans 1.24-27; *WLC* 139).

³ Van Dixhorn, Chad, *Confessing the Faith* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2014).

5. *Is sexual attraction towards a member of the same sex morally equivalent to sexual attraction towards a member of the opposite sex?*

While we appreciate attempts to graciously and compassionately minister the gospel to those struggling with same-sex attraction, it is mis-leading to indicate that attraction towards a member of the same sex is morally equivalent to attraction towards a member of the opposite sex. While Scripture frequently addresses same-sex sexual behaviors alongside of other forms of sexual immorality (Romans 1.18-32; 1 Corinthians 6.9; 1 Timothy 1.10), the equivalency does not go much further. Given that same-sex attraction is not in accord with God's creational design, God does not permit us to approach this attraction as good or morally neutral. While there are many perversions of heterosexuality, God does affirm this as his creational design and a good for his creatures to engage within the context of marriage between a man and a woman (Genesis 1.28; 2.24-25; 1 Corinthians 7.3-5).

6. *Should we encourage a faithful believer—who experiences persistent same-sex attraction, but chooses to honor God through a celibate lifestyle—to identify as a 'Gay Christian'?*

While there is some wisdom in naming sin openly, there are biblical reasons for avoiding this language.

Before offering critique, it would be charitable to offer a positive assessment first. In some cases, the desire is to not hide the sin of same-sex attraction but to proclaim it openly. The belief is that Christians suffering from same-sex attraction were, in previous generations, shamed from admitting this problem. The desire to proclaim oneself a 'Gay Christian', then, may spring from a desire to expose sin to the Gospel. It would be wise to embrace this problem (even if we do not embrace the same conclusion). Though it may seem to some that same-sex attraction is being discussed *ad nauseum*, we must pastorally ask how many Christians suffered in silence with these temptations. Nothing in the scriptures allows us to treat some sins as taboo or beyond discussion when it comes to confession of sin. In this sense, we should also embrace a spirit of freedom in grace.

However, there are reasons to question the label 'Gay Christian'. The most important issue is there is no biblical support for adding an adjective like this to the word 'Christian'. Biblical and historical patterns do allow for some distinctive labels ('Protestant Christian', 'American Christian'), but these are always focused on one's confession or location. There is no example in the New Testament or in history where a sinful act is used as a symbol for Christian identity.

Put simply, it's one thing to openly confess same-sex attraction, another to claim one is a 'Gay Christian'. One would never identify as a 'Fornicating Christian' or a 'Murdering Christian', etc. Paul in 1 Corinthians 6 actually points to a new identity in Christ that removes identification with former patterns of life ('And that is what some of you *were*'). Paul's language here does not undermine the fact of ongoing sin and temptation, but it does speak to an actual change in the believer. This change means we never again identify with the patterns of this world, or the patterns of our former lives apart from Christ. No appeal to grace can allow for such an under-realized eschatology. Being in Christ means that we are no

under sin's dominion—dead in our trespasses. The label 'Gay Christian', in not a few cases, goes overly long to make the case that Christians should embrace their sin, when Paul and the rest of the NT seems to speak in the other direction: the sin is conquered, now embrace the reality of a disciple.

We must speak more strongly when it comes to a latent issue with the label 'Gay Christian'—the separation of will and action in sin. The use of the label 'Gay Christian' too often means there is an assumption that one should not be ashamed of the desire itself, only the action. This is post-Freudian blather.

The Bible, of course, does distinguish between internal desire and outward action. If one were to choose between same-sex attraction and *any* sexual act with the same sex—of course the action is worse than the desire. Jesus knows the difference between saying 'Racca' and actually murdering someone.

The point, though, is that biblical ethics will not allow us merely to focus on sinful actions, while embracing or tolerating sinful desires. This actually is the pattern of the Pharisees and receives some of the sharpest rebukes possible from Jesus during his earthly ministry. The heritage of Reformed theology, too, has always stressed the real possibility of outward ethical conformity with ongoing inward sinfulness. The root of sin, Christ says, comes from within. Therefore, to embrace these desires—labelling oneself a 'Gay Christian' based on embracing the desires but not actions—undermines a central pattern in scripture and tradition.

Based on these issues, it is worth including another problem with the label 'Gay Christian': it takes its posture from an increasingly permissive society and not from scripture or tradition. The world has created and demanded that gay identity is normal—even commendable. It must be admitted that this cultural sway has, in part, driven the adoption of the label 'Gay Christian'. This is an insufficient reason for embracing new identities. Again, if the goal is to allow freedom for same-sex Christians to discuss their burdens, then let us seek an answer with every resource and strength possible.

However, too often the process of 'dialogue' about these issues is done with a posture of scandal and cultural elitism—a pride at finally answering questions no one *else* is asking. While this is not the only reason to question one's motive, it does compound the problems listed above.

7. What are the proper ways to create space in order to minister to people dealing with same-sex attraction?

As sinners saved by the grace of God, we must work not to despise those who experience same-sex attraction. Even if we do not find ourselves attracted to members of the same sex, we, too, participate in the moral declension of humanity (Romans 1.18-32; 1 Corinthians 6.11). As Adam's sons and daughters, we all have inherited a sinful nature and acted in accord with it, especially in the area of sexual immorality. Therefore, it is appropriate for Christians to operate with compassion, not disgust, when interacting with men and women who experience same-sex attraction.

The following are a few brief recommendations for pastoral ministry with regards to same-sex attraction in our cultural moment:

- Recognize that the church has encountered and confronted issues surrounding same-sex issues with grace and faithfulness for many centuries (1 Corinthians 6.9-11). While our culture has foregrounded the issue, the church need not be alarmist or respond in fear. Rather, this challenge presents the church with an opportunity to proclaim the grace of God to a broken and fallen world. It is a moment to extend hope to those who are hopelessly confused through the gospel.
- Uphold Biblical sexual standards, in thought, word, and deed, for the entire congregation. Be careful not to hammer the few struggling with same-sex attraction while going lighter on those dealing with other sexual attractions and behaviors. Sexual immorality is sexual immorality (Romans 13.13; Ephesians 5.3; 1 Thessalonians 4.3-7).
- With regard to sexual temptation, acknowledge that sexual temptation is not sexual sin. That said, temptation is always an inducement to do wrong. Therefore, the temptation is not neutral.
- Encourage Christians, struggling with the indwelling corruption of sin, with the gracious indicatives of the gospel that free us to embrace God's liberating imperatives. In Jesus Christ, we have been set free from the dominion of sin (Romans 6.7). Our challenge is to 'consider' ourselves—an act of faith—as dead to sin and alive to God in Christ (Romans 6.11). God forgives us and empowers us to walk in newness of life.
- Resist the cultural momentum that defines personal identity through sexual desires and inclinations. Human sexual behaviors do not confer identity—God does. Encourage those who struggle with same-sex attraction to root their identity outside of their sexuality, specifically by rooting their identity in Jesus Christ. Same-sex attraction may be a temptation someone encounters, but it is not the defining element of their personal identity.
- Discourage Christians dealing with persistent same-sex attraction from identifying as a 'Gay Christian' as this label is ultimately unhelpful, confusing, and sub-biblical.
- Strive to create a culture of welcome and genuine friendship at church that embraces single people, no matter their sexual temptations. When healthy, the church operates as a family that draws lonely, single individuals, including men and women who struggle with same-sex attraction, into the families that constitute the larger church family.
- Celebrate the dignity of marriage, but do not impugn the dignity of singleness. God calls some to serve him without a spouse (Matthew 19.11-12; 1 Corinthians 7.8). According to Paul, there are even advantages to it (1 Corinthians 7.32-35)! Therefore, we need to consider how to honor singles within our congregations and not operate

with a bias against them. For those who find themselves with unwanted same-sex attraction, singleness may well be God's call upon their lives. We should honor these brothers and sisters, enfold them into healthy relationships, and give them opportunities to serve the Lord and the church.

8. *What are resources for engaging this issue?*

The following are helpful resources for pastors and church leaders contemplating these weighty issues. This bibliography is in no way an endorsement of the views of these authors. Rather, a sampling of the literature is provided here that will orient you to the biblical and cultural conversations across all spectrums.

Allberry, Sam, *Is God Anti-gay?* (Philadelphia: The Good Book Company, 2015).

Butterfield, Rosaria, *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert* (Nashville: Crown and Covenant, 2012).

Butterfield, Rosaria, *Openness Unhindered* (Nashville: Crown and Covenant, 2015).

Gagnon, Robert, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001).

Grant, Jonathan, *Divine Sex* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2015).

Hays, Richard, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), 377-406.

Hill, Wesley, *Washed and Waiting* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010).

Stott, John, *Same-Sex Partnerships?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001).

Vines, Matthew, *God and the Gay Christian* (New York: Convergent, 2014).

Yarhouse, Mark, *Homosexuality and the Christian* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2010).

Wilson, Ken, *A Letter to My Congregation* (Grand Rapids: Read the Spirit Books, 2016).

Yuan, Christopher, *Out of a Far Country: A Gay Son's Journey to God* (Minneapolis: Waterbrook, 2011).