WHERE ANGELS FEAR TO TREAD

Week Four:

How to think well...
About sexual and gender identity

No medicine is more valuable, none more efficacious, none better suited to the cure of all our temporal ills than a friend to whom we may turn for consolation in time of trouble, and with whom we may share our happiness in time of joy. . . .
Here we are, you and I, and I hope that Christ makes a third with us. No one can interrupt us now... So come now, dearest friend, reveal your heart and speak your mind.
Aelred of Rievaulx (1110–1167)

GRACE
MILLS RIVER

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Porneia: The Making of a Christian Sexual Norm

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I. Defining a Biblical Keyword

The late fourth century was, not coincidentally, both the age of mass conversion and the period during which the penitential discipline of the Christian church was standardized: the mainstreaming of the religion generated a need to manage sinners on an unprecedented scale. So an *éminence* like Gregory of Nyssa found himself instructing a junior bishop on the church's taxonomy of sin.

> There is this division among those sins which come about through desire and pleasure: what is called μοιχεία and what is called πορνεία. For some who are more exacting, it is held that the sin pertaining to πορνεία is also μοιχεία, since there is only one legitimate union for both the wife with her husband and the husband with his wife. Everything, therefore, which is not legitimate is completely illegitimate, and he who has what is not his own clearly has what is another's. . . . But since the Fathers have allowed some indulgence toward those who are weaker, the sin is judged within this categorical division: a sin of desire which is accomplished without injustice to someone else is called πορνεία, but that which entails injury and injustice toward another is μοιχεία. (Gregory of Nyssa, *Ep. can. ad Letoium* 3)[1]

Gregory's letter provides invaluable insights into the mental structures within which late ancient Christians classified sexual misconduct. The church recognized a fundamental division between μοιχεία and πορνεία, often misleadingly translated as

I would like to thank my colleague Alan Levenson for characteristically helpful comments on this paper. The anonymous reviewers for *JBL* have also considerably helped me to improve the argument. Remaining errors are purely my own.

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.

"adultery" and "fornication." Μοιχεία was sexual violation of a respectable woman—extramarital sex with a wife, daughter, or widow. Πορνεία was extramarital sex that did not injure a third party such as a husband, father, or male relative who stood in a position of protection over a woman's sexual honor. The nature of the sexual sin, for the fourth-century church, was determined by the woman's place in society.

In this article, I trace the process through which Gregory's understanding of πορνεία prevailed as the dominant meaning of the term. Πορνεία is the lexical and ideological cornerstone of Christian sexual morality. It lies at the heart of the Pauline model of Christian sexuality. Yet, remarkably, its meaning has remained elusive for modern interpreters.[2] Derived from the Greek πόρνη ("prostitute"), the word passed into Latin as *fornicatio* and thence into English as "fornication." But "fornication" is effectively limited to ecclesiastical usage. As Carolyn Osiek has noted, "To say that πορνεία means fornication is circular, and the concept of illicit sex only begs the question of what is considered illicit."[3] One of the most thoughtful contemporary interpreters of Christian sexuality has warned that "the precise meaning of *porneia* is simply uncertain given the lack of evidence we have."[4] This

[2] F. Hauck and S. Schulz, "πόρνη, κτλ," *TDNT* 6:579–95; BDAG, 854–55, s.v. πορνεία; *PGL*, 1121–22, s.v. πορνεία. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Yale Bible 32; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 233, 255, 279; Will Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy: The Hellenistic Background of 1 Corinthians 7* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 13; Kathy L. Gaca, *The Making of Fornication: Eros, Ethics, and Political Reform in Greek Philosophy and Early Christianity* (Hellenistic Culture and Society 40; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Carolyn Osiek, "Female Slaves, *Porneia*, and the Limits of Obedience," in *Early Christian Families in Context: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue* (ed. David L. Balch and Carolyn Osiek; Religion, Marriage and Family; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 255–74; Jennifer A. Glancy, "Obstacles to Slaves' Participation in the Corinthian Church," *JBL* 117 (1998): 481–501, esp. 491, 493; Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 169; Renate Kirchhoff, *Die Sünde gegen den eigenen Leib: Studien zu πόρνη und πορνεία in 1 Kor 6, 12–20 und dem sozio-kulturellen Kontext der paulinischen Adressaten* (SUNT 18; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994); Peter J. Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law: Halakha in the Letters of the Apostle to the Gentiles* (CRINT 3.1; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 97–103; Gerhard Dautzenberg, "Φεύγετε τὴν πορνείαν (1 Kor 6,18): Eine Fallstudie zur paulinischen Sexualethik in ihrem Verhältnis zur Sexualethik des Frühjudentums," in *Neues Testament und Ethik: Für Rudolf Schnackenburg* (ed. Helmut Merklein; Freiburg: Herder, 1989), 271–98; Joseph Jensen, "Does Porneia Mean Fornication? A Critique of Bruce Malina," *NovT* 20 (1978): 161–84; Bruce Malina, "Does Porneia Mean Fornication?" *NovT* 14 (1972): 10–17; Hanz Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (trans. James W. Leitch; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 95–96; C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (BNTC; New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 121–22; Heinrich Baltensweiler, *Die Ehe im Neuen Testament: Exegetische Untersuchungen über Ehe, Ehelosigkeit und Ehescheidung* (ATANT 52; Zurich: Zwingli, 1967), 197–202.

[3] Osiek, "Female Slaves," 268.

[4] Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 231.

caution is warranted, for the meaning of a word so ideologically charged as πορνεία was neither simple nor static. Yet previous debates over the meaning of the term πορνεία have played out exactly as though there must be a precise and stable meaning out there, which we might recover if only we had just the right evidence.

This article is an attempt to go beyond the sterility of those debates. The premise of this investigation is that we can do better than to translate πορνεία as "sexual immorality" while still appreciating the inherent volatility of the term. Indeed, because any translation so vague inevitably threatens to become little more than a cipher for the interpreter's own views, it is imperative that we try to recover the content and connotation of the term in different texts and contexts. At the same time, we must remain alive to the possibility of radical shifts in the meaning of the term over time and to the probability that any word whose meaning was so rich and layered could have different meanings in different contexts. There are multiple ways that such an investigation should be pursued, but in the present study I try to reconstruct the major shifts in and additions to the meaning of πορνεία across time; focused study of individual texts would be welcome in the wake of this analysis. Here the emphasis is diachronic; the analysis is based on a comprehensive examination of the instances of the word in Greek texts from the sixth century B.C.E. to the sixth century C.E.[5] Such a mode of inquiry necessarily sacrifices depth in the name of breadth, but the exercise is justified if it allows us to see more clearly the long-term dynamics and trajectory of the term.

This survey begins in classical Greece, for an essential part of the argument is that Jewish and Christian usages of πορνεία differed radically from the secular semantics of the term. The investigation then traces the relationship between the Hebrew root זנה and πορνεία in the LXX; the Hebrew Scriptures created an enduring association between sexual sin and "idolatry." In Hellenistic Judaism we witness a widening of the term's meaning to indicate sexual acts of *male* commission and to include virtually any form of prohibited sexual relationship. We must stress that, for Jews and early Christians, the word πορνεία had both rhetorical and regulatory functions. Rhetorically, πορνεία, as a vice associated with morally depraved outsiders, became a key word in the construction of group sexual identities.[6] At the same time, πορνεία was not used simply as a slur against the behavior of outsiders; it served a regulatory function for insiders anxious about what types of sexual acts were licit.

The primary contribution of this study is to demonstrate how a complex word gradually became fixed on the meaning presented in Gregory of Nyssa's letter.

[5] The *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (*TLG*) yielded over fifty-three hundred examples that have been consulted for this analysis.

[6] See esp. Jennifer Wright Knust, *Abandoned to Lust: Sexual Slander and Ancient Christianity* (Gender, Theory, and Religion; New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 51–52, 63–64, 99, 158; see also, generally, Catharine Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

Greek and Roman sexual morality was rooted in social structure; sexual access to slaves and prostitutes was an exceptionally important part of Greco-Roman sexual culture. The legitimacy of heterosexual contact in Greek and Roman cultures turned on the status of the female partner.[7] No word is an island, and one key to the history of πορνεία is that it developed around the word μοιχεία. Μοιχεία meant violation of a woman's sexual honor, and πορνεία often functioned as a complementary term including sexual acts that did not violate female honor. This sense of πορνεία is visible already in Philo and Paul, but it becomes even more apparent in patristic texts. By appreciating the social valence of πορνεία we can identify the term's true historical significance as the key departure from Greek and Roman sexual culture.[8] Perhaps the most subtle yet transformative innovation of the term πορνεία was to give a single name to a diverse set of sexual practices that were widely accepted in antiquity precisely because they did not violate the social protocols of ancient sexual morality.[9]

II. Μοιχεία and Πορνεία in Classical Greece

A glance at πορνεία in classical Greece underscores the fundamental differences between secular and Jewish or Christian usages of the term, and it highlights the social dynamics of Greek sexual morality, which are deeply embedded in the language of μοιχεία. Greek sexual norms were fundamentally social and political, derived from the need to reproduce the οἶκος and the πόλις.[10] The central structuring principle of Greek heterosexual mores was the fundamental distinction between marriageable and nonmarriageable women.[11] Greek men were fixated on the issue of legitimacy, and they found the solution to their concerns in the strict

[7] Thomas A. J. McGinn, *Prostitution, Sexuality, and the Law in Ancient Rome* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[8] I thus agree with Gaca's claim that the prohibition of πορνεία marked the fundamental break with Greco-Roman sexuality, but I significantly depart from her argument that πορνεία for Paul and the early Christians was principally religious exogamy (see Gaca, *Making of Fornication*, e.g., 151).

[9] This radicalism is underscored by the neologism used to translate πορνεία into Latin: *fornicatio*. The Latin term (found exclusively in Christian literature) is beyond the scope of this study but deserves treatment. See J. N. Adams, "Words for 'Prostitute' in Latin," *Rheinische Museum für Philologie* 126 (1983): 321–58, here 337–38.

[10] Marilyn B. Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005).

[11] Rosanna Omitowoju, *Rape and the Politics of Consent in Classical Athens* (Cambridge Classical Studies; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 222–23; Daniel Ogden, *Greek Bastardy in the Classical and Hellenistic Periods* (Oxford Classical Monographs; Oxford: Oxford University Press), 100–106. Cf. James N. Davidson, *Courtesans & Fishcakes: The Consuming Passions of Classical Athens* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), 74.

regulation of the sexuality of honorable women. The respectable woman was expected to maintain her virginity until marriage and her chastity within marriage. Respectable women were ἐλεύθεραι, literally "free women."[12] Ἐλεύθεραι were wives, daughters, widows—women whose sexual honor was a concern to a citizen male, her κύριος. From classical Athens to late antique Antioch, ἐλευθέρα remained the basic term denoting sexual respectability.

The principal term of sexual transgression in classical Greek was μοιχεία, which meant "violation of a respectable woman."[13] The adulterer is not "a man who violates ἐλευθέρας too much"—he is one who violates them, period (Aristotle, [*Mag. mor.*] 1.8). But Athenian law held that a man was not a μοιχός if he had sex with a woman who sits in a brothel or sells herself openly (Demosthenes, [*Neaer.*] 59.67). This exemption from the adultery law, paralleled in later Roman law, sharpened the ideological distinction between respectable women, ἐλεύθεραι, and promiscuous women who were outside the protection of a κύριος and therefore the state.[14]

Μοιχεία refers specifically to the man's violation of a respectable woman; although the standard English translation of the word is "adultery," it would be better to emphasize "violation of a woman's honor," since the overwhelming connotation of the word points to the violation itself, even in later Jewish and Christian usage.[15] The μοιχός violates a woman, not his own marriage bond; there is no female equivalent. When a Greek author wished to speak of a woman who was implicated in adultery, some circumlocution was necessary, typically a passive form of μοιχεύω. In Aristophanes' *Pax*, in a passage that clearly recognizes female agency, the speaker said, "Do not do as the women who are adultered do" (Aristophanes, *Pax* 979–80: μὴ ποίει γ' ἅπερ αἱ μοιχευόμεναι δρῶσι γυναῖκες). This is paralleled in Biblical Greek (LXX Lev 20:10; John 8). The word μοιχεία would always evoke the visceral horror that accompanies the violation of a woman's honor in a patriarchal society.

The woman's consent in μοιχεία was always of secondary concern.[16] A μοιχός could be a seducer or a rapist, because μοιχεία was a crime against another man. In the first oration of Lysias, we hear that "Eratosthenes adultered my wife, he violated her, he shamed my children, and he dishonored me by entering my house" (Lysias, *Or.* 1.4). Violation, shame, and dishonor were inherent extensions of the principal crime, μοιχεία.[17] But the dynamics of female sexual respectability in classical Greece left a number of women beyond the pale of social honor. The group of women who were not ἐλεύθεραι included slaves, prostitutes, and courtesans. There

[12] Omitowoju, *Rape and the Politics of Consent*, 88, 101, 120–21.

[13] Ibid., 73–78, contra David J. Cohen, *Law, Sexuality, and Society: The Enforcement of Morals in Classical Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[14] For Roman parallels, see McGinn, *Prostitution, Sexuality, and the Law*, 194–202.

[15] This is not clear in standard dictionaries. LSJ (p. 1141, s.v. μοιχεία) has simply "adultery."

[16] Omitowoju, *Rape and the Politics of Consent*, 25, 69.

[17] Cohen, *Law, Sexuality, and Society*, 143–44.

was no single, encompassing term for these women. Slavery and prostitution were overlapping institutions.[18] From the origins of Greek civilization, slaves were prominent as a sexual outlet for men (e.g., Homer, *Od.* 1.430). Throughout the classical period, slaves were subject to the complete private power of their masters, and their bodies were completely vulnerable to the master's sexual advances.[19] The place of slavery in the sexual landscape of classical antiquity could hardly be overestimated.[20]

From its very beginnings, the slave trade was driven by the demand for commodified sexual availability (Herodotus, *Hist.* 2.134–35).[21] What is most notable about the sex industry in ancient Greece is its vitality and internal complexity.[22] In the late archaic period, a distinction developed between the ἑταίρα and the πόρνη.[23] There were material and ideological differences between the courtesan and the common whore, but the distinctions were fragile: some ἑταῖραι were clearly slaves; the "gifts" given to ἑταῖραι were slippery substitutes for cash exchanges; and πόρναι might be hired for the symposia too.[24] What mattered was that the woman was unmarriageable, deprived of sexual respectability, and thus available.

Prostitution was accepted, even valorized in Greek and later Roman culture. Tradition held that Solon had opened a public brothel in Athens (Philemon, *Frag.* 3; Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 569d).[25] True or not, the legend is an indication that the Greeks clearly recognized that prostitution played a constructive role in mediating the potentially violent dynamics of sexual competition (Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 568c–569f).[26] These ideas were perennial. At the end of antiquity, Salvian of Marseilles

[18] Edward E. Cohen, "Free and Unfree Sexual Work: An Economic Analysis of Athenian Prostitution," in *Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Ancient World* (ed. Christopher A. Faraone and Laura K. McClure; Wisconsin Studies in the Classics; Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 95–124. For Rome, see Thomas A. J. McGinn, *The Economy of Prostitution in the Roman World: A Study of Social History & the Brothel* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 75.

[19] Moses I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (expanded ed.; Princeton: Wiener, 1998), 163.

[20] Glancy, "Obstacles," 483–90; Kyle Harper, *Slavery in the Late Roman World, AD 275–425* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), ch. 7.

[21] See also Leslie Kurke, *Coins, Bodies, Games, and Gold: The Politics of Meaning in Archaic Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 220–27.

[22] Davidson, *Courtesans & Fishcakes*, 77.

[23] Laura K. McClure, *Courtesans at Table: Gender and Greek Literary Culture in Athenaeus* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 11–18; Kurke, *Coins, Bodies, Games, and Gold*, 175–219; Davidson, *Courtesans & Fishcakes*, 109–36.

[24] McClure, *Courtesans*, 18; Kurke, *Coins, Bodies, Games, and Gold*, 178; Kenneth J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (2nd ed.; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 20–21.

[25] See Susan Lape, "Solon and the Institution of the 'Democratic' Family Form," *CJ* 98 (2002–3): 117–39, here 133–34.

[26] McClure, *Courtesans*, 112–13. See also Augustine, *Ord.* 2.4.12.

could characterize *Roman* sexual policy—critically but not inaccurately—in four pithy words: "forbidding adulteries, building brothels" (Salvian, *Gub.* 7.22). Prostitution was considered a social necessity, an alternative to the violation of respectable women, in the Roman Empire no less than in classical Greece.

For all the importance of prostitution in Greek and Roman societies, πορνεία was not a common word. Πορνεία occurs in only four classical authors (by contrast, the word occurs nearly four hundred times in Jewish and Christian literature before 200 C.E., and over eighteen hundred times between 200 and 600 C.E.). This meager harvest strongly suggests that πορνεία was not a common term before Judaism and Christianity infused it with new meaning. Equally important, in classical Greek πορνεία does not mean "prostitution" in the abstract sense of "the institution of venal sex." This has never been sufficiently emphasized.[27] Πορνεία is a substantive of the verb πορνεύω, "to prostitute oneself." Πορνεία means "the practice of selling access to one's body."[28] Πορνεία, in classical Greek, refers to the activity of the *seller*. Likewise, πόρνος in classical Greek is the male equivalent of πόρνη (Xenophon, *Mem.* 1.6.13; Polybius, *Hist.* 12.15.2).[29] The πόρνος is a gigolo, not a john.

Crucially, then, classical Greek lacked a single, encompassing term to describe the different forms of sexual experience open to men in the form of slaves, prostitutes, and concubines. These classical inflections must be kept in mind as we consider the challenges of translating Hebrew sexual morality into Greek.

III. From Hebrew to Greek in Second Temple Judaism

The linguistic dynamics of πορνεία in the LXX were deeply influenced by the semantic range of the underlying Hebrew root זנה.[30] The principal meaning of the verbal form is "to engage in extramarital sex, to be unchaste." Phyllis Bird has clarified the meaning of this term in two ways. First, "*znh* is limited in its primary usage to female subjects, since it is only for women that marriage is the primary determinant of legal status and obligation."[31] זנה is very close to meaning "to be shameful, to fall into sexual shame." Second, the verbal form furnishes the primary

[27] Yet commentators have held that πορνεία "in the Greek world simply meant 'prostitution,' in the sense of going to the prostitutes and paying for sexual pleasure" (Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 199).

[28] Demosthenes, *Fals. leg.* 200; Aeschines, *Fals. leg.* 144; cf. Theopompus, *Frag.* 253; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* 4.24.4.

[29] Contra Hauck and Schulz, "πόρνη," 581.

[30] See S. Erlandsson, "*zānāh*," *TDOT* 4:99–104.

[31] Phyllis Bird, "'To Play the Harlot': An Inquiry into an Old Testament Metaphor," in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (ed. Peggy L. Day; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 75–94, here 77.

meaning of זנה. Yet translators have often started with the feminine participle, which is used to describe the professional prostitute. The practice of translating the verbal form with reference to the participial form "reverses the order of influence."[32] The RSV translates the verbal form as "to play the harlot." Rather, the prostitute is the woman who is habitually, essentially unchaste.[33] The term זנה had no masculine participle, and male prostitution had to be described by metaphor or circumlocution (e.g., Deut 23:18–19).[34]

The OT never strongly condemns male patronage of female prostitutes, though the wisdom literature includes some practical warnings against the wiles of public women.[35] But in Biblical Hebrew זנה acquired a metaphorical meaning that was to shape the destiny of the term in later discourse. From the time of Hosea, זנה came to mean idolatry (Hos 1:2; 4:12–13).[36] The metaphor turns on the comparison of the covenantal relationship and the marital relationship.[37] The visceral ideological charge of feminine unchastity was deployed to describe Israel's lack of faith. The prophets accused Israel of being a "spiritual slut." "It is easy for patriarchal society to see the guilt of a 'fallen woman'; Hosea says, 'You (male Israel) are that woman!'"[38]

The metaphorical sense of זנה as idolatry would decisively influence the development of Greek πορνεία. The metaphorical meaning allowed spiritual fornication to be used with acts of male commission. This semantic extension reversed the gender dynamics that are inherent in the primary sense of זנה. In Hosea we first see *men* committing fornication, albeit of the religious variety (Hos 4:18; cf. Num 25:1; Jer 13:27; Ezek 43:7–9). In Second Temple Judaism, this reversal would feed back into the sexual sense of the term, so that sexual fornication became an act that men could commit. The association between false forms of worship and deviant forms of sexual behavior would also make πορνεία an especially important term in the construction of group sexual identities.[39]

In the OT, זנה remained limited to these two basic meanings: female sexual dishonor and idolatry. But in Second Temple Judaism, זנה came to encompass any sexual act that transgressed the boundaries of licit sexual conduct. This decisive

[32] Ibid., 78.

[33] See esp. Gen 38:1–26 with Phyllis Bird, "Prostitution in the Social World and the Religious Rhetoric of Ancient Israel," in Faraone and McClure, *Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Ancient World*, 43.

[34] Bird, "To Play the Harlot," 91.

[35] See Gen 38:15; Josh 2:1; Judg 16:1; and Prov 5:3 and 29:3 for practical warnings.

[36] Bird, "Prostitution in the Social World," 49–55.

[37] Gerlinde Baumann, *Love and Violence: Marriage as Metaphor for the Relationship between YHWH and Israel in the Prophetic Books* (trans. Linda Maloney; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 43–46.

[38] Bird, "To Play the Harlot," 89.

[39] Knust, *Abandoned to Lust*, 51–52.

expansion of meaning long precedes the elaboration of Christian sexual morality and would profoundly influence it. Most remarkably, πορνεία in this period came to include prostitution as an illicit sexual outlet for Jewish men. Whereas the OT tolerates prostitution as an institution, in late Second Temple Judaism, prostitution became an illegitimate form of sexual practice, for male customers and female professionals alike.[40]

Perhaps the earliest witness to the more expansive meaning of πορνεία is the book of Sirach, composed in the first decades of the second century B.C.E.[41] Beyond the practical warnings against prostitution (9:6; 19:2), common also to other wisdom literature, Sirach breaks important new ground. "Two sorts of men multiply sins, and a third incurs wrath" (Sir 23:16–18 RSV). In the first two cases, the male sinner is described as an ἄνθρωπος πόρνος. Unfortunately it is not perfectly clear which sins precisely the author has in mind.[42] The first ἄνθρωπος πόρνος sins "in the body of his own flesh." The second ἄνθρωπος πόρνος is a man "for whom all bread tastes sweet," and the third sinner is a man who disgraces his marriage bed, thinking himself beyond the sight of God. What is most remarkable is that πόρνος is being used to describe *male* sexual transgression. In classical Greek, the πόρνος was the male prostitute; here it is used in apposition to ἄνθρωπος (influenced by Hebrew) to mean "the sexually sinning man."

The description of an adulterous wife in Sirach also reveals the range of πορνεία: "Through her fornication she has committed adultery and brought forth children by another man" (23:22–23 NRSV). She will bear illegitimate offspring because ἐν πορνείᾳ ἐμοιχεύθη. Μοιχεία in Greek, when used of women, required the passive voice; it was difficult to emphasize the woman's agency with μοιχεύω alone. The addition of ἐν πορνείᾳ here emphasizes her dishonorable behavior. Translations such as the NRSV, which make "commit adultery" active, obscure the reason why it was necessary to add ἐν πορνείᾳ as a way of underlining her volition in the dishonorable act.

Sirach also attests the use of πορνεία as a broadly conceived sexual vice. In ch. 41, the author gives a list of moral apothegms, some of them deliberately paradoxical. In the first of these, Sirach enjoins the reader to "be ashamed of sexual immorality [περὶ πορνείας] before your father or mother" (41:17 NRSV). The audience is implicitly masculine, and the meaning of πορνεία is clearly sexual. Later in

[40] The causes of this shift—doubtless part of broader social transformations described recently by T. M. Lemos (*Marriage Gifts and Social Change in Ancient Palestine: 1200 BCE to 200 CE* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010])—deserve more attention than they can receive here.

[41] Patrick W. Skehan and Alexander A. Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira: A New Translation with Notes* (AB 39; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1987), 9; John G. Snaith, *Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach* (CBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 1.

[42] Snaith, *Ecclesiasticus*, 118; Hauck and Schulz, "πόρνη," 588.

the chapter, Sirach warns against "looking at a prostitute" (γυναικὸς ἑταίρας), against "gazing at another man's wife," and against "meddling with his servant-girl" (41:20–22 NRSV). Sirach attests to the ascent of a conjugal sexual morality in late Second Temple Judaism; the injunctions against sex with slaves and prostitutes are a noteworthy development.

The most intriguing witness to the expansion of πορνεία and its ascent to the position of a chief vice is the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*. The value of its testimony is compromised by the uncertainties surrounding the provenance of the work. The extant text is a redaction of the second century C.E. with Christian elements.[43] But there are strong indications that the underlying source is a product of Hellenistic Judaism.[44] Πορνεία is the first vice to appear in the first testament, and the root πορν- appears thirty-two times in the text. The warnings against πορνεία are pervasive, and they are so integral to the extant text that this preoccupation likely belongs to the original Hellenstic-Jewish fabric of the text.[45]

Πορνεία in the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* functions, as in Sirach, as a catchall vice for any sexual transgression. "Πορνεία has destroyed many" (*T. Reu.* 4:7). Wine and beauty lead to πορνεία, and the young are particularly susceptible to its charms (*T. Jud.* 14:2; *T. Reu.* 1:6; 4:6). Πορνεία was flexible enough to accommodate a wide range of sexual misdeeds. Reuben was guilty of πορνεία for sleeping with Bilhah, Rachel's maid, because his father had been in the same bed (*T. Reu.* 1:6). Judah was conquered by the spirit of fornication, both for taking Tamar when he thought she was a prostitute and for marrying Bathshua (*T. Jud.* 13:3; 14:2, 3). Levi was encouraged to marry, while he was still young, a chaste Jewish girl, in order to avoid fornication (*T. Levi* 9:9). Potiphar's wife tried, but failed, to lead the virtuous Joseph into πορνεία (*T. Jos.* 3:8). Benjamin predicted that his heirs would "fornicate the fornication of Sodom" (*T. Benj.* 9:1). Women, too, were especially vulnerable to the power of πορνεία (*T. Reu.* 5:3). In the *Testaments*, πορνεία has become an inclusive sexual category denoting illicit sexual activity, including incest, prostitution, exogamy, and unchastity.[46] Issachar ends his testament by claiming, "I am 122 years of age, and I have never known a sin up to my death. Except for my wife, I never knew another woman. I have not committed πορνεία by the uplifting of my eyes" (*T. Iss.* 7:1–2). For Jews living in a Hellenic culture that tolerated, even

[43] Harm W. Hollander and Marinus de Jonge, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs: A Commentary* (SVTP 8; Leiden: Brill, 1985), 83–85; *Studies on the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs: Text and Interpretation* (ed. Marinus de Jonge; SVTP 3; Leiden: Brill, 1975); Marinus de Jonge, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs: A Study of Their Text, Composition and Origin* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1953).

[44] Howard Clark Kee, "The Ethical Dimensions of the Testaments of the XII as a Clue to Provenance," *NTS* 24 (1979): 259–70.

[45] Brian S. Rosner, *Paul, Scripture, and Ethics: A Study of 1 Corinthians 5–7* (AGJU 22; Leiden: Brill, 1994), 139, 143–44.

[46] Hauck and Schulz, "πόρνη," 587.

encouraged the sexual use of dishonored women, πορνεία was an ever-present temptation, and it became the principal vice, the "mother of all evils" (*T. Sim.* 5:3). This sharp sensibility toward the danger of πορνεία, nurtured in the world of Hellenistic Judaism, lies behind future Christian developments.[47]

Several texts demonstrate that the Semitic root זנה developed alongside the Jewish lexeme πορν- so that it, too, included male commission and could be flexibly applied to prohibited sexual relations. First, in the book of Tobit (probably Aramaic in origin), Tobit instructs his departing son, Tobias, "Beware, my son, of every kind of fornication. First of all, marry a woman from among the descendants of your ancestors; do not marry a foreign woman, who is not of your father's tribe" (4:12 NRSV). Πορνεία is a chief vice, and the phraseology recognizes its manifold nature. Tobias is told to take a wife "from the tribe" of his father. This is an encouragement to practice close-kin marriage within the tribe of Naphtali. Here we are in the strong presence of πορνεία as a rhetorically charged term which could condense all the sexual and religious differences between Jews and outsiders: in Tobit, the opposite of πορνεία, of whoring with loose, foreign women, is to marry a good Jewish girl of very near relations (see also Tob 8:7).[48]

In *Jubilees,* fornication is a leitmotiv, and it includes both idolatry and sexual transgression.[49] An even more remarkable testimony is the *Damascus Document.* The text speaks of the "three nets of Belial," the first of which is "fornication." Fornication, here, is sex that falls outside of marriage according to the Jewish law, but the requirements of legitimate marriage are interpreted very restrictively. Fornication is said to include polygamy and remarriage after divorce (CD 4.12b–5.14a).[50] Fornication also includes incest, specifically uncle–niece marriage. Fornication is thus deployed polemically to describe any sexual contact violating the law, even this rigorist sectarian interpretation of the law.

The most important witness to the development of πορνεία in Hellenistic Judaism is Philo. Philo believed that Moses had prohibited prostitution (*Spec.* 3.51). For Philo, legitimate sexuality was exclusively marital, and even within marriage temperance was to be observed, lest pleasure overcome the rational soul (*Spec.* 3.9). Philo personified the dueling forces of pleasure and virtue in the soul as two women: the one a πόρνη, the other an ἐλευθέρα (*Sacr.* 20–33). The two were oppo-

[47] The instruction Φεύγετε οὖν τὴν πορνείαν, "Therefore, flee πορνεία" (*T. Reu.* 5:5) is probably a source of 1 Cor 6:18 (Rosner, *Paul, Scripture, and Ethics,* 137–39).

[48] On the context, see Amy-Jill Levine, "Diaspora as Metaphor: Bodies and Boundaries in the Book of Tobit," in *Diaspora Jews and Judaism: Essays in Honor of, and in Dialogue with, A. Thomas Kraabel* (ed. A. Thomas Kraabel, J. Andrew Overman, Robert S. MacLennan; South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism 41; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 105–17.

[49] *Jubilees* 7:21 (the Watchers); 16:4 (homosexuality); 20:3, 6; 23:15, 25:8 (exogamy); 39:6 (adultery).

[50] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "The Matthean Divorce Texts and Some New Palestinian Evidence," *TS* 37 (1976): 197–226, here 219–20.

sites, one outwardly beautiful and promising sensual delight, the other modest but promising righteousness. Here Philo seamlessly combines the familiar stereotypes of Greek society, the Platonic soul, and a Mosaic vision of righteousness.

In Philo's *De Iosepho*, the patriarch becomes a mouthpiece for Philo's version of Jewish sexual morality. When Potiphar's wife tries to seduce Joseph, he resists "like a free man, worthy of his race" (*Ios.* 40–42). He tells her:

> We descendants of the Hebrews live according to a special set of customs and norms. Among other peoples, it is permitted for young men after their fourteenth year to use without shame whores, brothel-girls, and other women who make a profit with their body. Among us it is not even permitted for a professional woman to live, but it is ordained that she will be sentenced to death. Indeed, before legitimate marriage, we know no sexual intercourse with other women, but we enter marriage as pure men with pure virgins. (*Ios.* 43)

This discourse is colored more by life in Roman Egypt than second-millennium B.C.E. Egypt. The essential difference between Jewish sexual morality and the customs of "other nations" lay in the practice of prostitution.

In *De vita Mosis,* Philo includes an illuminating presentation of πορνεία that reflects the word's potential meanings in the first century C.E. Philo retold, with elaborate embellishment, the story of the heresy of Peor (Numbers 25). In Philo's version, Balaam tells Balak, "Feminine beauty is the greatest weakness for man. If you order the most beautiful of the women to prostitute themselves and become public women, you will ensnare the youth of your rival" (*Mos.* 1.296). The women seduce the young men with all the prostitute's arts, playing hard to get until they convince the Israelite youth to sacrifice to false gods in exchange for sexual favors. Never had the metaphor of "whoring after false gods" been described in such literal and dramatic detail.

It is revealing that in Philo's rendering, when Balak decides to enact this plan, "he repealed the law against adulteries, and abolished those against seduction and πορνεία, as if they had never been enacted, and ordered the women to have intercourse freely with any of the men they wished" (*Mos.* 1.300). When Philo turns to describe the king's stratagem and imagines the different classes of sexual conduct that had to be deregulated to allow this sexual ruse to succeed, there were three categories: μοιχεία, φθορά, and πορνεία. The violation of a wife or otherwise honorable girl was μοιχεία or φθορά; sexual use of other women was πορνεία. In Philo we see the sense of πορνεία being influenced by its use as a complement to other words in the Greek sexual lexicon; this potential role of πορνεία would strongly influence its development in early Christianity.

By the first century C.E., πορνεία was the chief vice in a system of sexual morality rooted in conjugal sexuality. Πορνεία was broad enough to cover sexual sins as diverse as incest and exogamy. But for Hellenistic Jews, in a culture where sex with dishonored women, especially prostitutes and slaves, was legal and expected, the term condensed the cultural differences between the observers of the Torah and

Gentile depravity. The Greek root πορν- already suggested the public sexual availability of the prostitute, and it made the association between the term πορνεία and the types of sexual license permitted in Gentile culture practically inevitable.

IV. Πορνεία in the New Testament

The Greek root πορν- occurs fifty-six times in the NT, and the idea of πορνεία is fundamental to the sexual ideologies of early Christianity. Scholarly discussion has justifiably focused on 1 Corinthians, but it is worth briefly cataloguing the other instances of the term in the NT, for these reflect the full range of the term's meaning and its inherent complexity in the context of a missionary religious movement in the early Roman Empire. The wild tirade against Rome in Revelation accounts for a third of the total cases (esp. chs. 17–18). The full fury of the prophets' metaphor finds expression in the Christian apocalypse, as Rome is personified as an aggressive, idolatrous whore. The noun πόρνη is frequently used to describe professional prostitutes (Luke 15:30; Heb 11:31; Jas 2:25). Πορνεία appears seven times in vice lists (Matt 15:19; Mark 7:21; 2 Cor 12:21; Gal 5:19; Eph 5:3; Col 3:5; Rev 9:21). Three times πόρνοι, males who engage in illicit sexual activity, appear in lists of evildoers (1 Cor 6:9; Eph 5:5; 1 Tim 1:10). Once πόρνος is used to describe Esau, probably referring to exogamy (Heb 12:16). Two complicated and much-discussed usages of πορνεία in the NT—in the Matthean exceptions and the "apostolic decree"—deserve closer attention before we turn to the letters of Paul. Indeed, Matthew and Acts underscore the fact that any interpretation of πορνεία must recognize the diversity of its usage in the canonical Scriptures.

Paul (1 Cor 7:10–11), Mark (10:2–12), and Luke (16:18) attribute to Jesus a rigorist opposition to divorce, but Matthew, in two passages, places on the lips of Jesus an exception, παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας (5:32) and μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ (19:9). These exception clauses have given rise to extensive commentary.[51] The use of πορνεία here is interesting, but perhaps not as puzzling as sometimes suggested. The exception clauses are related to Deut 24:1, where a man is allowed to divorce his wife if he discovers some indecency in her (LXX: ἄσχημον πρᾶγμα). In Greek, the language of πορνεία was never far from the language of shame which ἄσχημον evokes.[52] It is sometimes asked why Matthew did not just use the word μοιχεία, but a plausible answer is that, in Greek, μοιχεία means violation, and the requisite passive

[51] See esp. Dale C. Allison Jr., "Divorce, Celibacy and Joseph (Matthew 1.18–25 and 19.1–12)," *JSNT* 49 (1993): 3–10; Markus Bockmuehl, "Matthew 5.32; 19.9 in the Light of Pre-rabbinic Halakhah," *NTS* 35 (1989): 291–95; Fitzmyer, "Matthean Divorce Texts," 197–226; Hauck and Schulz, "πόρνη," 591–93; Baltensweiler, *Ehe im Neuen Testament*, 87–92. Martin (*Sex and the Single Savior*, 134–37) offers an intriguing alternative.

[52] See Sir 26:9, where both words are used in quick succession to describe the adulterous wife. Cf. Aeschines, *Ctes.* 246; Plutarch, [*Apoph. lac.*] 236B; Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 2.7.60.

voice does not imply female agency or moral failing.[53] Πορνεία, by contrast, evokes the shame of the woman's actions. It is used here in a way not far from the sense of the Hebrew זנה as "to fall into dishonor" (see also Sir 23:23; 26:9).

The term πορνεία appears three times in Acts, each time in the "apostolic decree" issued from Jerusalem, which specified minimal requirements for Gentile Christians (15:20, 29; 21:25). The logic of the prohibitions is notoriously unclear, and πορνεία is the only term that is not a dietary restriction.[54] One explanation is that this list reflects the Holiness Code of Leviticus 17–18.[55] On this logic, the Gentile Christians were expected to observe the requirements of the law that kept them from polluting Jewish Christians. Πορνεία would have to mean "incest" and to derive from the prohibited unions in Leviticus 18.[56] There are numerous objections to this interpretation, including the fact that these were not the only four requirements laid down for aliens.[57] Numerous other explanations have been suggested.[58] In any case, the decree remains enigmatic, and we can say no more about πορνεία here than that it probably recognizes the fundamentally different sexual culture of the Greeks and asks Gentile converts to observe the stricter norms of Jewish sexuality.[59] In other words, we need to invoke the strong rhetorical power of the word and its ability to condense the vast cultural differences between sexually pure "insiders" and sexually depraved "outsiders" to appreciate its unexpected centrality in the apostolic decree.[60]

Ultimately, Christian understandings of πορνεία develop out of Paul's letters,

[53] Fitzmyer ("Matthean Divorce Texts," 207) rightly calls the efforts to read the exceptive phrases as something other than justifications for divorce "subterfuges to avoid the obvious." He favors reading πορνεία as "incest" in Matthew because if "Matthew had meant" adultery, "he would have written *moicheia*" (p. 209), but this reconstruction shares the common misunderstanding of μοιχεία and πορνεία as adultery and fornication.

[54] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 31; New York: Doubleday, 1998), 557. Some manuscripts of Acts, moreover, omit "whatever has been strangled" and add the negative golden rule.

[55] Fitzmyer, *Acts of the Apostles*, 557–58; Terrance Callan, "The Background of the Apostolic Decree (Acts 15:20,29; 21:25)," *CBQ* 55 (1993): 284–97; Malina, "Does Porneia," 13.

[56] Baltensweiler, *Ehe im Neuen Testament*, 93–94.

[57] S. G. Wilson, *Luke and the Law* (SNTSMS 50; Cambridge: Cambridge Univeristy Press, 1983), 84–94.

[58] A. J. M. Wedderburn, "The 'Apostolic Decree': Tradition and Redaction," *NovT* 35 (1993): 362–89.

[59] Peder Borgen, "Catalogues of Vices, the Apostolic Decree, and the Jerusalem Meeting," in *The Social World of Formative Christianity and Judaism: Essays in Tribute to Howard Clark Kee* (ed. Jacob Neusner et al.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 126–41.

[60] This assertion is strengthened if Acts is seen as an apologetic work. See Loveday Alexander, "The Acts of the Apostles as an Apologetic Text," in *Apologetics in the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews, and Christians* (ed. Mark Edwards, Martin Goodman, and Simon Price; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 15–44.

especially 1 Corinthians 5–7. In these densely argued chapters, Paul addresses a series of problems in the Corinthian community. The sequence of the argument and especially the interrelation among the problems discussed have been the object of much analysis.[61] In ch. 5, Paul begins a discussion by declaring, "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality [πορνεία] among you, and of a kind [τοιαύτη πορνεία] that is not found even among pagans; for a man is living with his father's wife" (1 Cor 5:1 NRSV). Although it has been suggested, not unreasonably, that the woman in question is a concubine rather than a stepmother, the latter is more likely.[62] Regardless, the relationship between the son and his father's woman constituted incest, as prohibited by Lev 18:8. The LXX does not call incest πορνεία, but Paul uses the term in the expanded sense that arose in Hellenistic Judaism, to cover any sexual relationship in violation of the law. Paul was saying, then, that there was an illegitimate sexual relationship of a sort that even the pagans, not famous for their rigorous sexual morality, found illicit.[63]

Paul next castigates the Corinthians for tolerating the presence of this man among them. He reminds the Corinthians "not to associate with sexually immoral persons [πόρνοις]" (1 Cor 5:9–11 NRSV). The πόρνος here is the male sexual sinner, the man who commits πορνεία. In secular Greek, by contrast, the πόρνος was the male prostitute. Paul clearly does not mean that the Corinthian community is harboring male prostitutes, but rather that they are failing to expel men who indulge in the ordinary pleasures of life in a Greek city under the Roman Empire.

In the next section, Paul discusses how Christians should adjudicate their quarrels. The manner in which this issue relates to the case of πορνεία previously described remains unclear.[64] Then, in 6:9, Paul lists examples of unrighteous types. The list includes πόρνοι and μοιχοί.[65] The distinction between πόρνος and μοιχός, even in Paul's writings, does not turn on the man's marital status; hence "fornicator" and "adulterer" are misleading in English.[66] The overwhelming and pervasive sense of μοιχός is "violator"—one who trespasses on honorable female sexuality. The sense of πόρνος is larger and less distinct. The one (πόρνος) implies the man

[61] Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 248; Peter Richardson, "Judgment in Sexual Matters in 1 Corinthians 6:1–11," *NovT* 25 (1983): 37–58.

[62] Craig Steven De Vos, "Stepmothers, Concubines and the Case of ΠΟΡΝΕΙΑ in 1 Corinthians 5," *NTS* 44 (1998): 104–14; cf. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 234.

[63] Gaca's understanding of πορνεία as religious exogamy cannot stand here (see *Making of Fornication*, 151), in perhaps the most important canonical usage of the term πορνεία. Paul's objection is not rooted in the woman's alien religious status. He specifies that the relationship is πορνεία insofar as (ὥστε) she was the man's father's wife, and Paul evokes the LXX language of Leviticus to describe the illicit union.

[64] See esp. Will Deming, "The Unity of 1 Corinthians 5–6," *JBL* 115 (1996): 289–312.

[65] It also included the notoriously difficult terms μαλακοί and ἀρσενοκοῖται; see Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 37–50.

[66] Contra, e.g., Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 265.

with a lascivious lack of self-control; the other (μοιχός) implies the man who corrupts respectable women. To understand what these words mean, we must recognize that Paul's discourse is firmly lodged in the context of the Greek city under the Roman Empire.

1 Corinthians 6:12–20 must be the crux of any interpretation of Pauline πορνεία.[67] Paul turns the discussion back to sexuality by quoting a slogan: "All things are lawful for me." Once considered an early sign of Gnosticism, the phrase is now more often seen as the banner of a libertine segment within the Christian population of Corinth.[68] The phraseology may reflect the influence of a Stoic distinction between the permissible and the ethical.[69] Paul emphasizes the moral importance of bodily purity throughout this section.[70] As Dale Martin has shown, Paul works with a view of the body as a permeable entity, vulnerable to contamination.[71] In the decisive passage, Paul says,

> The body is meant not for fornication [πορνεία], but for the Lord. . . . Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute [πόρνη]? Never! Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, "The two shall be one flesh." But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Shun fornication [φεύγετε τὴν πορνείαν]! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator [ὁ πορνεύων] sins against the body itself. (1 Cor 6:13–18 NRSV)

At issue is a category of sexual activity that some members of the Corinthian community believe is allowed but that Paul views as illicit. This category is most readily comprehensible as that wide subset of extramarital sexual activity that was tolerated in Greek culture, the sexual use of dishonored women. If there were any doubt that Paul had prostitution principally in mind, his immediate reference to the πόρνη makes it clear that for him, as for Philo, prostitution was the main venue of such pagan sexual license.[72]

In ch. 7, Paul considers the place of marriage in the fledgling Christian communities. He begins with what is usually considered a quotation from the letter sent from the Corinthians: "it is well for a man not to touch a woman" (NRSV).[73]

[67] Rosner, *Paul, Scripture, and Ethics*, 123–46; and esp. Kirchhoff, *Sünde gegen den eigenen Leib*, passim.

[68] Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 263; Martin, *Corinthian Body*, 105–8, 205–8, but see Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law*, 75.

[69] Deming, "Unity," 303.

[70] Bruce N. Fisk, "ΠΟΡΝΕΥΕΙΝ as Bodily Violation: The Unique Nature of Sexual Sin in 1 Corinthians 6.18," *NTS* 42 (1996): 540–58.

[71] Martin, *Corinthian Body*, 174–79.

[72] Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 265.

[73] Martin, *Corinthian Body*, 207.

Paul cannot fully endorse this position, for a revealing reason. "But because of cases of sexual immorality [διὰ τὰς πορνείας], each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband" (NRSV). First, the plural accusative of πορνεία implies "acts of illicit sexual behavior."[74] Second, marriage is the alternative to πορνεία.[75] This suggests, of course, that πορνεία is extramarital sex and that marriage is a way to manage desire safely.[76] The subsequent discussion, where Paul steers a moderate course on marital abstinence, and v. 9, where Paul recommends marriage for those who cannot exercise self-control, confirm this reading. Ultimately, πορνεία in Paul's letters does have the broad sense of "sexual immorality," but we must recognize what especially this meant in the context of the Greek city under Roman rule, where sex with dishonored women was permitted, legally and culturally. It is revealing that, whereas authors of the Roman period saw sex with prostitutes or slaves as the solution to adultery, Paul saw marriage as the solution to the temptations of easy sex with dishonored women (see, e.g., Horace, *Sat.* 1.2.31–35).[77]

V. Πορνεία after Paul: Fornication as a Christian Leitmotiv

The prohibition of πορνεία was destined to become the bedrock of a distinctly Christian sexuality. It is beyond the compass of this essay to provide a comprehensive account, but we can follow, very briefly, the career of the word down to the period of Christian triumph. Although the grounds of sexual morality were intensely contested in the early Christian communities flung across the Roman Empire, the dominant trend in the use of πορνεία was the ascendance of one particular meaning—sex with dishonored women. If late Second Temple Judaism and first-century Christianity saw a widening of the term πορνεία to include virtually any prohibited sexual act, the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire went hand in hand with a narrowing of the term to refer primarily to the category of acts described in Gregory of Nyssa's letter.

A range of early Christian texts highlight the important regulatory function of πορνεία as a limit on male sexual conduct. In these texts, it is apparent that πορνεία meant nonmarital sexuality, which the ancient world permitted in the case of men because the female partner lacked sexual honor. In the *Didache*, for example,

[74] See ibid., 291, on the "strangeness" of the construction.

[75] Jensen, "Does Porneia," 182.

[76] 1 Corinthians is so enmeshed in its Greek social context that Paul simply never considers "fornication" in the sense of two respectable partners engaging in consensual sex (Martin, *Corinthian Body*, 179).

[77] See further, Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality* (2nd ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 45–51.

πορνεία appears in a list of negative injunctions. "Do not commit μοιχεία; do not violate children; do not commit πορνεία" (2.2). Μοιχεία, sex with children, and πορνεία stood as a trinity of great sexual vices.[78] In identical language, the *Letter of Barnabas* commands Christians not to engage in πορνεία, μοιχεία, or sex with children (19.4). In Hermas, πορνεία appears three times. It appears once in a vice list between μοιχεία and drunkenness (*Mand.* 8.38.3). In another passage, Hermas is warned not to have thoughts "for the wife of another, nor for any fornications, nor for any such wickedness. . . . But by remembering your own wife always, you will never fall into such sin" (*Mand.* 4.29.1). The man is presumably married, and the distinction between πορνεία and μοιχεία obviously turns on the status of the woman, not the man. In a later passage, Hermas asks if a husband who discovers his wife "in some adultery" would be guilty for remaining with her; if the husband is aware of her adultery and she "persists in her πορνεία," then he is guilty (*Mand.* 4.29.4–5). For a married man, sex might be μοιχεία or πορνεία, depending on whether the female partner possessed sexual honor; for a married woman, any μοιχεία was πορνεία because it inherently brought sexual shame upon her.

In a number of early Christian texts, the rhetorical function of πορνεία is in the foreground. Principally, these are texts that speak in an apologetic voice, and πορνεία is presented as a signal difference between the norms of the morally upright Christian community and the depraved culture of the nonbelievers. So, Justin could laud the virtue of his Christian compeers: "Those who once rejoiced in their fornications [πορνείαις] now embrace self-control alone" (*1 Apol.* 14; cf. 27). Athenagoras would characterize the Romans as a people "who have set up a market in fornication and created unholy retreats of every shameful pleasure for young men" (Athenagoras, *Leg.* 34.2). As Jennifer Wright Knust has shown in her important study of sexual rhetoric, this sort of sexual invective was simultaneously a "key strategy for drawing boundaries between insiders and outsiders" and "for enforcing insider sexual ethics."[79]

The rhetorical and regulatory functions of πορνεία are blurred in the writings of a figure like Clement of Alexandria, whose works speak both to insiders and outsiders.[80] In Clement's writings we see the rise of an austere conjugal standard,

[78] John W. Martens persuasively argues that "οὐ παιδοφθορήσεις" was a Christian coinage casting all sex with children as inherently corrupting ("'Do Not Sexually Abuse Children': The Language of Early Christian Sexual Ethics," in *Children in Late Ancient Christianity* [ed. Cornelia B. Horn and Robert R. Phenix; Studies and Texts in Antiquity and Christianity 58; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009], 227–54). See also Cornelia B. Horn and Martens, *"Let the Little Children Come to Me": Childhood and Children in Early Christianity* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 225–32.

[79] Knust, *Abandoned to Lust*, 52–53.

[80] Gaca, *Making of Fornication*, 247–72; Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 122–39.

demanding that even within marriage sex be restricted to procreationist aims (e.g., *Paed.* 2.2.83; *Strom.* 2.23.137). Clement wrote extensively on sexual norms, and πορν- was for Clement truly a keyword (129 instances). For Clement, marriage and πορνεία remain conceptual opposites. "The distance between marriage and fornication is as great as that between God and the devil" (*Strom.* 3.12.84). Clement recognizes that secular laws allow πορνεία (*Paed.* 3.3.22). Clement, aware of the flourishing market in sex slaves and prostitutes under the Roman Empire, imagines the ships full of enslaved women and boys destined for the flesh trade (*Paed.* 3.3.22). Πορνεία was equivalent to the cluster of sexual practices that developed in the space allowed by public law and encouraged by the institutions of slavery and prostitution. "The whole world is full of πορνεία and disorder" (*Paed.* 3.3.22).

Clement's writings also provide some of our best insights into the contentious landscape of early Christianity and its dissident sexual ideologies. Some encratites, for instance, argued that all sex was sinful and that marriage was πορνεία (*Strom.* 3.6.49). These encratites deployed the shared meaning of a word in a polemical context. To say that "marriage is πορνεία," is analogous to saying that "abortion is murder." For Clement, "if anyone dares to say that marriage is πορνεία, it is blasphemy" (*Strom.* 3.12.89). Discussing the prohibition of πορνεία in 1 Corinthians 6, Clement writes, "And to show that with πορνεία he is not saying marriage, he adds, 'do you not know that the one who cleaves to a πόρνη becomes one body?' Would anyone say that an unwed virgin is a πόρνη?" (*Strom.* 3.18.107).

Clement's writings already show a movement toward systematic social thought, but the decisive period came later. The fourth century saw the church transformed from a persecuted minority into a dominant public institution. In the fourth century, the rhetorical function of πορνεία as the sin characteristic of "others" lost ground to the regulatory function of πορνεία as a sin prohibited to insiders. The church found itself in conflict on a new scale with the habits and values of secular society, and this conflict centered on the category of sexual practices covered by the term πορνεία.[81] The broader encounter between Christian sexual morality and secular culture is visible in two types of characteristically fourth-century documents: canons and homilies. In the rules of ecclesiastical discipline and in the pastoral campaigning of Christian preachers, we can follow the church's struggle to promote its standards of sexual propriety.

In the *Apostolic Constitutions*, πορνεία is a major concern. Parents are enjoined to raise their children strictly, lest they fall into πορνεία; early marriage is the surest cure against sexual temptation (4.11). Pederasty, μοιχεία, and πορνεία remained the principal sexual vices to be avoided, and the marital status of the woman, rather than the man, continued to mark the distinction between πορνεία and μοιχεία (6.28). The canonical literature of the fourth century reflects an impulse to codify the scattered injunctions of the NT and to think through the practical implications

[81] Harper, *Slavery in the Late Roman World*, ch. 7.

of church doctrine. Whereas Paul's epistles to the Corinthians show the apostle speaking in a manner that implicitly takes the free male's perspective, the fourth century saw an attempt to apply Christian norms from a variety of social angles. The *Apostolic Constitutions* contain rules for slaves who commit πορνεία, for pimps who wish to enter the church, and for πόρναι who repent of their sins (8.32). We thus see the broader concerns of the church as a newly majoritarian institution. Basil of Caesarea's canonical letters represent the most complete attempt to consider πορνεία and to specify the penalties attached to violations of the church's sexual norms (*Ep.* 199.22, 38, 40, 42). Basil notes that the church's customs allow for a man to leave a wife who breaks the marital faith, even though a wife cannot leave a fornicating husband (*Ep.* 188.9; 199.21). Basil views these double standards with consternation, but he would not overrule tradition (*Ep.* 199.21).

It is fitting to end the investigation with John Chrysostom. The fight against πορνεία was a personal crusade for this remarkable church leader, and his vast homiletic corpus is an unparalleled dossier of evidence for the decisive period of Christianization.[82] In Chrysostom's sermons, the pastoral energy of the church collided with a society where ancient patterns of social reproduction still held. The sharp dichotomy between respectable and shameful women that was evident in classical Athens prevailed, and even the vocabulary had changed little (*Iter. conj.* 97). Chrysostom was among the most enthusiastic interpreters of Paul. "Μοιχεία is wicked, πορνεία is wicked, but marriage is the appointed cure for πορνεία" (*Hom. 1 Cor. 7:2, Propter fornicationes* 2; *PG* 51:210).

> Therefore, there is one purpose for marriage: to avoid πορνεία . . . and it is not the same thing to commit πορνεία without having a wife and to do it while having one. For in the latter instance, it is rather μοιχεία, not πορνεία. And even if what I am saying is a paradox, it is true. I am not unaware that many believe it is μοιχεία only when one violates a woman with a husband. But I say that a man with a wife wickedly and licentiously commits μοιχεία if he should use a public whore, a slave girl, or any other woman without a husband. (*Propter fornicationes* 3–4; *PG* 51:213)

John was one of those "more exacting" interpreters mentioned by Gregory who refused to distinguish between πορνεία and μοιχεία. John argued that the status of the woman was irrelevant—sex with slaves, prostitutes, and other unprotected women was a violation of God's will. But the significant historical fact is that John lived in a world where it was still *necessary* to make such an argument. John rec-

[82] The root πορν- appears nearly fourteen hundred times in Chrysostom's extant corpus. On his preaching more generally, see Jaclyn L. Maxwell, *Christianization and Communication in Late Antiquity: John Chrysostom and His Congregation in Antioch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); on the homiletic corpus, see Wendy Mayer, *The Homilies of St John Chrysostom, Provenance: Reshaping the Foundations* (OrChrAn 273; Rome: Pontificio Istituto orientale, 2005).

ognized that his claims were a "paradox," because they violated the basic social premises of sexual morality. And we must remember that John's voice is that of a zealous moral reformer. Even if men like John believed that πορνεία and μοιχεία were equally damnable, and even if they said so in their sermons and letters, the rules of the church continued to recognize the graver consequences of sex that violated a woman's honor.

VI. Conclusions: The Significance of Πορνεία

The category of πορνεία is the cornerstone of a distinctly Christian sexual morality. The usual translations—"fornication" and "sexual immorality"—reflect the breadth and flexibility of the term's meaning, but they obscure its actual content and connotations. I have argued that, to understand what the word could mean in various ancient texts, it is necessary to appreciate both the many strata of textual meaning that accrued over the centuries and the ever-present influence of social structure on ancient sexual morality. The pervasive misunderstanding of the classical meaning of πορνεία has obscured the radicalism of Judeo-Christian πορνεία. Classical πορνεία was the act of selling oneself, not a whole class of actions categorized as immoral. Jewish and Christian πορνεία could evoke the whole array of extramarital sex acts of which Greek and Roman culture approved. The word πορνεία so effectively and so dramatically condensed the differences between pre-Christian and Christian sexuality that it requires some effort to reenter the sexual culture of the Mediterranean at a time when sexual norms were immanent in patterns of social reproduction. Πορνεία is indeed extramarital sex—but Christian "fornication" developed amid a society where the legitimacy of heterosexual contact was determined not by the presence or absence of marriage so much as the status of the woman involved.

The First Sexual Revolution: The Triumph of Christian Morality in the Roman Empire

September 9, 2019

Kyle Harper's ***From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity*** **(Harvard, 2013)** is an impressively learned and important book. Still a youngish man (which means younger than me), Harper is already a professor of classics and letters *and* senior vice president and provost at the University of Oklahoma. As an expert in the history of the late Roman world, Harper explores in this volume how the Christian sexual ethic, so despised and seemingly inconsequential in the first century, came to be codified in law by the sixth century.

Harper does not take sides in this transformation. Indeed, Christians could read the book and conclude, "Look at what good Christianity brought!" while secularists might read the same material and conclude, "Look at all the oppression Christianity wrought!" This is not a book with an agenda (so far as I can tell), other than to show what the transformation of sexual morality entailed and how it happened. Nevertheless, as a Christian, I found the book illuminating, not only for the historical understanding of sexual morality in late antiquity but for the lessons the church in the 21st century might learn from the witness of the church in the first centuries.

The Revolution

Harper's title is not about the psychologizing of morality from external social judgment to internal angst and disapproval. Rather, the title is about

the transformation of an assumed moral system to a radically different moral system—from one that had shame as a social concept to one that had sin as a theological concept.

Here is the transformation in a nutshell:

Sexual morality in the Roman Empire was permissive, based on social status, and sexual desire could be fulfilled in a myriad of ways.

Sexual morality under the triumph of Christianity was austere, based on gender, and sexual desire could be fulfilled in only one way.

Sexual Morality in the Roman Empire

Same-sex relationships were common in the Roman world. What made them acceptable or not was age and status dynamics. One piece of literature tells of travel to the afterlife where the Isle of the Blessed is described as "all the wives are shared in common without jealousy. . . and all the boys submit to their pursuers without resistance" (24). Pederasty was not considered a problem. Neither was sexual fulfillment with slaves. Slaves, prostitutes, and boys were seen as perfectly legitimate outlets for male sexual desire. In an empire of 70 million, between 7 million and 10 million were enslaved. Harper says, "Slaves played something like the part that masturbation has played in most cultures" (27).

Pederasty was common and widely approved by the Romans (with exception of some Stoics). It was not shameful for boys to give themselves to older men, nor was it shameful for older men to pursue boys. What was shameful was for men to play the passive role in a homosexual relationship. They were called effeminate, or she-men, or acting like men during the day and behaving like girls at night. This behavior was severely ridiculed.

At the end of *The Ephesian Tale*, an older lover "adopts" his young male beloved. It was not a marriage, but Harper says it was a happily-ever-after kind of union. In one of Juvenal's satires he has a man of wealth given away in marriage to another man. He imagines a day when male-male marriage will take place publicly and be recorded in the official registers of the state.

In other words, there *are* examples in the Roman world of long-lasting same-sex couples. It's not that all homosexuality was man-boy love. In fact, there is evidence that some same-sex pairs ritually enacted their own conjugal rights. At the same time, there never was, even in the sexually permissive Roman Empire, any sort of gay marriage with official legal standing. On the whole the Romans did not tolerate homosexuality, at least not for themselves. They were extremely tolerant of Roman men seeking out sexual pleasure from boys, slaves, and prostitutes. They were not at all tolerant of free Roman men being penetrated as the passive actors in same-sex relationships. "The viciousness of mainstream attitudes toward passivity is startling for anyone who approaches the ancient sources with the false anticipation that pre-Christian cultures were somehow reliably more civilized toward sexual minorities" (37).

As for women, they were to be virgins before marriage and loyal and faithful wives within marriage. To pursue any other path meant great shame (or much worse). Adultery was a crime against man. The woman's chief virtue was *pudicitia* (modesty). Harper relates that from sexual maturity women wore their hair veiled as a sign of modesty.

Generally, there were laws insisting upon consent, for free women, for both marriage and sex. There were liberal divorce laws, allowing both men and women to unilaterally sue for divorce for almost any cause. We should not think free Roman women were pining for sexual liberation. Woman often promoted the value of modesty as much as anyone else, and they used the

ideal of chastity to their advantage.

Prostitution was ubiquitous and uncontroversial. It was seen as a proper outlet for a man's sexual energy. If a man had sex with prostitutes before marriage, he could still be counted a virgin. If he had sex with prostitutes during marriage, it was not considered adultery. One Christian bishop described Roman sexual policy as "forbidding adulteries, building brothels."

Prostitution was part of the official, public face of Roman life, not something hidden or in the background. Prostitution was considered a social necessity, an important safety valve. Rome in the fourth century had no fewer than 45 public brothels. It was thought that if you removed prostitutes from civic life, you would overturn the whole social order, and lust would conquer. "The commodification of sex was carried out with all the ruthless efficiency of an industrial operation, the unfree body bearing the pressures of insatiable market demand. In the brothel the prostitute's body became, little by little, 'like a corpse'" (49).

Young women reached sexual maturity and were married soon after, while men often waited a considerable time after puberty before marriage. There were two main rules of sexual morality for free Roman men: avoid adultery and avoid being the passive partner in homosexuality. Beyond that, everything was open. The sexual escapades of young men, provided they were not with married women, were almost entirely inconsequential.

Marriage was important in late antiquity. There are even examples of the "sentimental" family. Romans did not usually marry for love, but they did want it to grow into love.

Here, then, was the basic system of sexual morality in the Roman world: "early marriage for women, jealous guarding of honorable female sexuality, an expansive slave system, late marriages for men, and basically relaxed

attitudes toward male sexual potential, so long as it was consonant with masculine protocols and social hierarchy. . . . The value of a sexual act derived, first and foremost, from its objective location within a matrix of social relationships" (78).

Sexual Morality in the Christian Empire

The Christian sexual ethic, it should be obvious, was radically different from mainstream Roman culture. Even the more "conservative" Stoics should not be seen as precursors to Christian morality. While some of the language may be the same (e.g., contrary to nature), the ideas, the values, and the reasons for Stoic ethics and Christian ethics were entirely different. As Harper notes, sexual morality quickly came to mark the great divide between Christians and the rest of the world.

Christians inherited from Hellenistic Judaism an expansive category of *porneia* that made little sense to the Romans. There would no longer be harmless, innocent outlets for male sexual desire outside of marriage. There is simply no avoiding the conclusion that Christianity presented a sexual ethic that was radically new. This was felt poignantly when it came to attitudes toward homosexual behavior. "For the historian, any hermeneutic roundabout that tries to sanitize or soften Paul's words is liable to obscure the inflection point around which attitudes toward same-sex erotics would be forever altered" (95). This new inflection point was Paul's overriding sense of gender—rather than age or status—as the chief factor in whether a sexual act was licit or not. Paul's concern for sexual morality was about males and females, not about men and boys or married women or single or slaves or free.

Harper explains that from Paul onward, Christian sexual morality "collapsed all forms of same-sex contact, whether pederastic or companionate, into

one category" (99). "Nature" was seen as that which corresponded to social norms. With Christianity, "nature" would be that which corresponded to a gendered morality of sex. Preachers like Chrysostom condemned same-sex behavior, with no concern for whether it was pederasty, the exploitation of slaves, or more durable same-sex partnerships. Under Justinian we see the criminalization of same-sex behavior, though there is little evidence this was carried out with any kind of intrusive spying upon private life.

Harper argues that Christian sexuality led to a new understanding of the freedom of the will. In Christian morality, humans possessed moral agency over their sexual drive. Even men, it was believed, could exert control over their erotic experiences. No one was simply at the mercy of insatiable appetites and "normal" sexual overflow.

Marriage was critical, of course. Monogamy, Harper argues, was more of a Roman ideal than a Jewish one. A single conjugal unit was considered the norm for free Romans (even if men were allowed all sorts of exceptions that didn't count against this single unit). Christianity redefined Roman monogamy to eliminate any other kind of sexual experience. Harper says two doctrines emerged as essential to Christian marriage that marked it off from the rest of the Roman world: sexual exclusivity and firm opposition to divorce and remarriage.

Here, then, was the basic system of sexual morality in the Christian age: "virginity was ideal, marriage acceptable, sex beyond marriage sinful, same-sex eros categorically forbidden. . . The most astonishing development of late antiquity is the transformation of a radical sexual ideology, for centuries the possession of a small, strident band of vociferous dissenters, into a culture, a broadly shared public framework of values and meaning" (135).

Winners and Losers

The triumph of the Christian sexual ethic would be unthinkable, except that it actually happened. Aphrodite was slain by the Christians (135). The Christian sexual revolution became codified in law under the reign of Justinian (527-565). Sex between males was a crime, and pederasty was outlawed. Christian laws under Justinian also vigorously opposed coerced prostitution.

Under the new morality, same-sex love, regardless of age, status, or role was strictly forbidden without any qualifications. Sexual behavior went from the background to the foreground of ethical concern. Sexual deviance went from something with social ramifications, to a sin that was grievous in the sight of God and could have eternal ramifications. Marriage, which was always understood in the Roman world as the union between a man and a woman, became the only appropriate outlet for sexual activity. "All the worlds' diffuse erotic energy was to be cramped into one, frail, sacred union" (161).

If there were "winners" and "losers" in the Christian transformation of sexual morality, you could say that gay men and promiscuous Roman males were the losers, while women, slaves, prostitutes, and young boys were the big winners. "At the beginning of our story," Harper writes, "the Mediterranean was home to a society where an emperor's male beloved, victim of an untimely death, would be worshiped around the empire as a god; in this same society, the routine exploitation of slaves and poor women was a foundation of the sexual order. By the end, we are in a world where the emperor will command the gory mutilation of men caught in same-sex affairs, even as he affirmed the moral dignity of women without any civic claim to honor" (18).

Lessons to Be Learned

Harper's book is a work of academic history. For the most part, he doesn't comment on the history he presents either to approve it or condemn it. It should go without saying—but I'll say it anyway—that the first centuries of the church's history were not necessarily purer or better than subsequent centuries. I trust that few Christians today are pining for Christian Empire, let alone the enforcement of Christian morality by physical mutilation. The lesson for the church today is not to attempt to recreate the church from another age.

And yet, there are lessons to be learned from the transformation of sexual morality in late antiquity. Let me mention three.

First, for most of its early history, the church's power came through preaching, writing, and through its own rigorous system of membership and discipline. Even when she was ignored, harassed, or outright persecuted, the church still wielded important power simply by consistently preaching the truth, developing an apologetic for the truth, and insisting that its members believed and lived out the truth. You can't win the larger culture by losing your own.

Second, Christianity went from cult to culture in part because the sexual ethic was considered better and safer and more freeing for more people. Obviously, not everyone found Christian morality to be an improvement on traditional Roman standards. But Christian ethics meant a profoundly improved lot in life for women, children, the enslaved, and the poor. The changes came slowly—over centuries, not over years and decades—but changes did come. Virginity, for example, became a loud advertisement for the Christian religion, and women in particular took notice.

Third, we should expect conflict over sex. If Christians in late antiquity had

made peace with the world over sex, Christianity would not have been true to itself. The same can be said today. Profoundly different versions of sexual morality cannot be wished away by civil discourse (though civility is good), nor washed away by theological compromise (that would be bad). "Because the problem of sex is inevitably tied to the problem of Christianity's relation to the world, it is a tension that will surface during any great readjustment in the relationship between Christianity and the world" (160). In other words, the problem is not going away. Let's hope the church's winsome commitment to beauty and truth doesn't either.

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Was Paul unclear in his teaching on sexuality?

July 26, 2019 by Ian Paul

I have been engaging on and off in the debates about sexuality and Christian discipleship since around 1978, when Buzz magazine (which eventually morphed into Christianity magazine) produced a slightly risky exploration of the issues at stake. Since then, I have noticed that the discussion has shifted ground, both in wider society and within the church. In wider society, it is quite surprising that we have ended up with same-sex marriage, since that had not really been the main demand in the recognition of gay rights, but it has afforded gay relationships with a respectability and status that was desired. Within the church in the UK, much of the debate has been whether the writers of the New Testament either encountered the kinds of relationships that we know, whether they understood the psychology of sexuality in the way we now do—and whether their negative assessment of same-sex sexual relationships in the very few references that we have is correct.

But more recently, another response has come to the fore, and it is one I encounter almost every time I speak on this issue. 'The question of what the texts say is all so complicated—and can we really be sure

of what Paul actually meant?' The reason for this is the explosion of literature (in texts like Matthew Vines' *God and the Gay Christian*) which popularise the questioning of what has been a strong consensus that the texts are fairly clear, consistent with one another, and offer a uniformly negative assessment of same-sex sexual activity. Vines' text is written in an accessible style, and comes with supporting YouTube footage, so has sold well and been very influential—but I find it a very hard read, since there are pretty excruciating and basic errors on just about every page, for anyone who knows about how to read ancient texts. But of course most of Vines' readers don't, and Vines himself does not even have a first degree in theology. In relation to the New Testament, he often draws on the work of John Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* first published in 1980. Boswell's work did not at the time have much impact on the scholarly consensus of the meaning of the biblical texts, since his methodology was so poor, picking sources that suited his argument and ignoring those that didn't support his view. But times change, and nearly forty years on much of the church has forgotten some of the basic disciplines of how to make sense of texts.

I have been thinking about two recent examples of this kind of argument—that the texts in Paul are either unclear or do not mean what we thought—one popular and one more scholarly. The popular one can be found in an interview with someone called Ed Oxford, which serves to trail a forthcoming book. It is accessible, and is written in a 'whodunnit?' style in which we are led through Oxford's amazing discoveries about the history of translation of the key terms in Paul. But the methodology is pretty shocking; Oxford seems to think that we understand what terms in the Greek text mean by means of looking at the history of translation, rather than by looking at the prehistory, context and canonical place of these terms. (A similarly poor approach

is taking by the substantial *Love Lost in Translation* which I bought and read and quickly realised why it had been self-published.)

The more scholarly approach is that of Jonathan Tallon, who teaches at Northern Baptist College. Tallon has set up a website with a series of articles on the different texts and issues that arise from them; here I am just considering his article on 1 Cor 6.9.

For me, the problems start with the opening sentences. Tallon poses the issues in these terms: 'What does Paul say about homosexuality in 1 Corinthians?' This assumes that there is such a thing as 'homosexuality', that we are agreed on what it is, and that Paul thought in such terms. I think each of these assumptions are highly questionable. The next sentence goes on: 'Is he saying that those who are gay or lesbian won't enter God's kingdom?' He seems immediately to be assuming that, if Paul is expressing a negative assessment of same-sex sex (SSS), then he is also then expressing a negative assessment of same-sex atrtacted people, as if our identity and our patterns of desire and action are fused and can never be separated. As with much discussion on this subject, the assumptions here are implicit rather than explicit, and so might not be noticed by many readers—but they make a massive difference to the shape of the argument and to what is seen to be at stake.

He then points us to Paul's 'vice list' in 1 Cor 6.9–10, which includes the contested terms *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai,* but he makes no comment about how such vice lists function in Paul's writing, how they relate to the immediate context in 1 Corinthians, how they connect with Paul's pastoral strategy in the letter, or more broadly how they relate to vice lists in either first century Judaism or wider culture (vice lists were common in Stoic literature of the period). Locating the texts in their wider context in the NT and Paul, and locating Paul within his

world are actually vital aspects of the task of making sense of texts; I realise that Tallon's piece is aimed at a popular audience, but this exploration would still be possible in a popular format.

Tallon then discusses the term *malakos*, the least contentious of the two, and I think I would broadly agree with his conclusions; I am not persuaded by the common conclusion of Tom Wright and others that this is a reference to the passive, 'receptive', partner in anal intercourse, with *arsenokoites* referring to the active, penetrating, partner. This is a possible meaning grammatically, but Tallon is right to point out that it also had a wider moral sense—and the two terms are not grammatically paired with one another, since all the terms in the list are simply separated with 'neither...neither...neither...' (*oute*), a feature which gives the list a particularly high rhetorical impact. But the wording of Tallon's conclusion is interesting:

> My view? I think Paul was referring generally to the morally weak, those who choose to let their lusts lead their actions.

That doesn't look too far away from a critique of people who let their patterns of desire form their identity.

Tallons' discussion of the second key term, *arsenokoites*, is much more problematic. The strong consensus, following the detailed and technical argument of David Wright in in 1984 (in which he comprehensively responds to the arguments of John Boswell) is that Paul has coined the term from the Greek (Septuagint, LXX) of Lev 20.13 in order to describe in the most general terms all forms of SSS. Even if you are not a reader of Greek, you can probably see the very close parallel:

> Lev 20.13: καὶ ὃς ἂν κοιμηθῇ μετὰ **ἄρσενος κοίτην** γυναικός,

> βδέλυγμα ἐποίησαν ἀμφότεροι
>
> 1 Cor 6.9: ...οὔτε μοιχοὶ οὔτε μαλακοὶ οὔτε **ἀρσενοκοῖται** οὔτε κλέπται...

Paul is using a plural form here; the singular *arsenokoites* is even closer to the text of Leviticus, differing in only one letter from the actual text. To coin a contemporary example, if I exclaimed 'You are just a to-be-or-not-to-be kind of person', it is likely that you would recognise a citation from Shakespeare's Hamlet, Act 3 Scene 1, even if you could not give the reference. It is an unusual phrase; it stands out from my usual terminology; and it refers to a very well-known expression. All these things apply in the same way to Paul's language here.

Tallon notes that words do not in later use derive their meaning from their constituent parts:

> But working out meaning this way is dangerous – a cupboard doesn't necessarily have cups inside; the chairman of the board doesn't necessarily refer to an item of furniture. And as for butterflies...

The problem here is that, whilst *later* use is not determined by the elements of a word, the *original coining* of the term obviously did. As Wikipedia helpfully points out:

> The term **cupboard** was originally used to describe an open-shelved side table for displaying dishware, more specifically plates, cups and saucers. These open cupboards typically had between one and three display tiers, and at the time, a drawer or multiple drawers fitted to them. The word cupboard gradually came to mean a closed piece of furniture.

Given that there are simply no examples of the word *arsenokoites* before Paul, or after him except where Christian authors appear dependent on him, it is the original sense of the word we are interested in—and Tallon's argument here actually undermines his subsequent discussion of later use!

Tallon mentions David Wright's argument that it comes from Leviticus, but dismisses it quickly, commenting:

> Just looking at the construction of the word, and its possible source from Leviticus, suggests that it is referring to those who bed males. But those who bed *males*, not men.

The reason for that, as Robert Gagnon has pointed out, is that the Leviticus text itself is referring back to the creation text, where God made humanity in his image, 'male and female he created them' (not, in Gen 1.27, 'man and woman'). In other words, Paul is citing Leviticus citing Genesis, and so the rejection of SSS is rooted in the sex dimorphic creation of humanity, something that Paul refers to explicitly in Romans 1.18f.

Tallon then suggests that *arsenokoites* is often associated with economic exploitation (this is the argument of gay scholar Dale Martin, whose article he lists at the end) but this language is actually absent from the text in Paul. (Martin, in a 2008 biographical article, argues that all sex is ethical as long as the way you have sex reflects the nature of your relationship, be that committed, casual or a one-night stand. I think that would be quite difficult to justify from reading Paul.) Tallon also points to the later Christian concern about *paidophthorēseis,* translated as 'corrupting children', but actually referring to what was thought of as the usual practice in Greek and Roman culture, of older men have penetrative anal sex with younger, receptive males. What is most striking here is that Paul himself *does*

not use this term, nor does he use the usually pair of terms for same-sex lovers, *erastus* and *eramenos*. Paul appears to have coined a general term, on the basis of Lev 20.13, to refer in the most general way to SSS. (It is also worth noting that we, like later Christian writers, think that SSS between age-unequal partners the least acceptable, because of our focus on questions of consent and equality. But in the ancient world, this was seen as the most *acceptable*, and the idea of anal sex between *adult males* was shocking and unacceptable, since the passive partner was the inferior, and this offended against the idea of the free adult male.)

David Wright's rather technical article reaches this conclusion:

> [I]t is probably significant that the word itself and comparable phrases used by Philo, Josephus and Ps-Phocylides spoke generically of male activity with males rather than specifically categorized male sexual engagement with *paides*. It is difficult to believe that *arsenokoitia* was intended to indict only the commonest Greek relationship involving an adult and a teenager. The interchangeability demonstrated above between *arsenokoitia* and *paidophthoria* argues that the latter was encompassed within the former. A broader study of early Christian attitudes to homosexuality would confirm this.

Robert Gagnon, well-known commentator in this area, offered a substantial argument on the meaning of these terms in response to the interview with Ed Oxford I mentioned earlier:

> As for whether *Paul* intended to limit the word arsenokoitai to men who have sex with adolescent boys, consider the following:
>
> (1) Clear connections to the Levitical prohibitions of male-male

intercourse. The compound Greek word arsenokoitai (arsen-o-koi-tai; plural of singular arsenokoitēs) is formed from the Greek words for "lying" (verb keimai; stem kei- adjusted to koi- before the "t" or letter tau) and "male" (arsēn). The word is a neologism created from terms used in the Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Levitical prohibitions of men "lying with a male" (18:22; 20:13). (Note that the word for "lying" in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Levitical prohibitions is the noun koitē, also meaning "bed," which is formed from the verb keimai. The masculine –tēs suffix of the sg. noun arsenokoitēs denotes continuing agency or occupation, roughly equivalent to English -er attached to a noun; hence, "(male) liers with a male.")

That the connection to the absolute Levitical prohibitions against male-male intercourse is self-evident from the following points: (a) The rabbis used the corresponding Hebrew abstract expression mishkav zākûr, "lying of/with a male," drawn from the Hebrew texts of Lev 18:22 and 20:13, to denote male-male intercourse in the broadest sense. (b) The term or its cognates does not appear in any non-Jewish, non-Christian text prior to the sixth century A.D. This way of talking about male homosexuality is a distinctly Jewish and Christian formulation. It was undoubtedly used as a way of distinguishing their absolute opposition to homosexual practice, rooted in the Torah of Moses, from more accepting views in the Greco-Roman milieu. (c) The appearance of arsenokoitai in 1 Tim 1:10 makes the link to the Mosaic law explicit, since the list of vices of which arsenokoitai is a part are said to be derived from "the law" (1:9). While it is true that the meaning of a compound word does not necessarily add up to the sum of its parts, in this instance it clearly does.

(2) The implications of the context in early Judaism. That Jews of

the period construed the Levitical prohibitions of male-male intercourse absolutely and against a backdrop of a male-female requirement is beyond dispute. For example, Josephus explained to Gentile readers that "the law [of Moses] recognizes only sexual intercourse that is according to nature, that which is with a woman. . . . But it abhors the intercourse of males with males" (Against Apion 2.199). There are no limitations placed on the prohibition as regards age, slave status, idolatrous context, or exchange of money. The only limitation is the sex of the participants. According to b. Sanh. 54a (viz., tractate Sanhedrin from the Babylonian Talmud), the male with whom a man lies in Lev 18:22 and 20:13 may be "an adult or minor," meaning that the prohibition of male-male unions is not limited to pederasty. Indeed, there is no evidence in ancient Israel, Second Temple Judaism, or rabbinic Judaism that any limitation was placed on the prohibition of male-male intercourse.

(3) The choice of word. Had a more limited meaning been intended —for example, pederasts—the terms paiderastai ("lover of boys"), paidomanai ("men mad for boys"), or paidophthoroi ("corrupters of boys") could have been chosen.

(4) The meaning of arsenokoitai and cognates in extant usage. The term arsenokoitēs and cognates after Paul (the term appears first in Paul) are applied solely to male-male intercourse but, consistent with the meaning of the partner term malakoi, not limited to pederasts or clients of cult prostitutes (see specifics in The Bible and Homosexual Practice, 317-23). For example, the 4th century church historian Eusebius quoted from a 2nd-3rd century Christian, Bardesanes ("From the Euphrates River [eastward] ... a man who ... is derided as an arsenokoitēs ... will defend himself to the point of murder"), and then added that "among the Greeks, wise men who

> have male lovers are not condemned" (Preparation for the Gospel 6.10.25). Elsewhere Eusebius alluded to the prohibition of man-male intercourse in Leviticus as a prohibition not to arsenokoitein (lie with a male) and characterized it as a "pleasure contrary to nature," "males mad for males," and intercourse "of men with men" (Demonstration of the Gospel 1.6.33, 67; 4.10.6). Translations of arsenokoitai in 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10 in Latin, Syriac, and Coptic also define the term generally as "men lying with males."
>
> ...
>
> (8) Implications of 1 Tim 1:9-10 corresponding to the Decalogue. At least the last half of the vice list in 1 Tim 1:8-10 (and possibly the whole of it) corresponds to the Decalogue. Why is that important? In early Judaism and Christianity, the Ten Commandments often served as summary headings for the full range of laws in the Old Testament. The seventh commandment against adultery, which was aimed at guarding the institution of marriage, served as a summary of all biblical sex laws, including the prohibition of male-male intercourse. The vice of kidnapping, which follows arsenokoitai in 1 Tim 1:10, is typically classified under the eighth commandment against stealing (so Philo, Pseudo-Phocylides, the rabbis, and the Didache; see The Bible and Homosexual Practice, 335-36). This makes highly improbable the attempt by some to pair arsenokoitai with the following term andrapodistai (kidnappers, men-stealers), as a way of limiting its reference to exploitative acts of male-male intercourse (so Robin Scroggs), rather than with the inclusive sexual term pornoi (the sexually immoral) that precedes it....

It is worth reading the whole comment for a comprehensive argument.

I know Robert Gagnon a little; I have attended seminars at which he

has spoken, and we once visited the British Museum together. I don't agree with all of his arguments, and we have very different political outlooks. But what is interesting about his argument here is the number of mainstream, theologically liberal, scholars who cite him. William Loader's research on sexuality in the New Testament cites Gagnon several times on each page when addressing the issues they both study. Loader recognises the quality of Gagnon's research and the force of his argument about what Paul actually meant—though Loader takes the diametrically opposite view to Gagnon on the ethical issue of same-sex relationships. He thinks Paul, and therefore Gagnon, is wrong.

Similarly, it is worth noting the approach of the Pauline scholar E P Sanders, in his 850-page *magnum opus* on Paul from 2015. Sanders had a huge impact on Pauline scholarship with his argument about the nature of first-century Judaism, giving rise to the so-called 'New perspective on Paul'. This latest volume summarises and draws together his thinking on Paul, rather than engaging with recent arguments—but he has added in (for some reason) a 60-page assessment of Paul and SSS.

Sanders makes some very interesting comments about the function and role of Paul's vice lists, noting their connections with both Jewish and Stoic lists, though also noting the characteristic emphasis on idolatry and sexual immorality that was a consistent feature of Diaspora Judaism in the period. He also notes the function of the vice lists as a rhetorical device; Paul's actual pastoral handling of individual cases of sin was quite different—which seems to me to be highly pertinent in the current context. But his conclusion is in line with David Wright, Robert Gagnon and William Loader: Paul is rejecting every form of SSS, drawing on the text of Lev 20.13, and in doing so he sits

squarely within the tradition of Diaspora Judaism which took a very similar view. This is striking, Sanders notes, since in many other ways, Christianity adopted many other aspects of pagan culture; this issue was the one where there was sharpest disagreement between Christianity's two 'parents' of Judaism and Graeco-Roman culture, and on the question of SSS, it came down unequivocally on the side of Judaism. He concludes:

> Diaspora Jews had made sexual immorality and especially homosexual activity a major distinction between themselves and gentiles, and Paul repeated Diaspora Jewish vice lists. I see no reason to focus on homosexual acts as the one point of Paul's vice lists that must be maintained today.
>
> As we read the conclusion of the chapter, I should remind readers of Paul's own view of homosexual activities in Romans 1, where both males and females who have homosexual intercourse are condemned: 'those who practice such things' (the long list of vices, but the emphasis is on idolatry and homosexual conduct) 'deserve to die' (1.31). his passage does not depend on the term 'soft', but is completely in agreement with Philo and other Diaspora Jews. (p 373)

This conclusion is in line with other commentators who have looked carefully at the issue:

> It is very possible that Paul knew of views which claimed some people had what we would call a homosexual orientation, though we cannot know for sure and certainly should not read our modern theories back into his world. If he did, it is more likely that, like other Jews, he would have rejected them out of hand....He would have stood more strongly under the influence of Jewish creation tradition which declares human beings male and female, to which

> may well even be alluding in 1.26-27, and so seen same-sex sexual acts by people (all of whom he deemed heterosexual in our terms) as flouting divine order. (William Loader, The New Testament and Sexuality, p 323-4)
>
> Where the Bible mentions homosexual behavior at all, it clearly condemns it. I freely grant that. The issue is precisely whether that Biblical judgment is correct. (Walter Wink, "Homosexuality and the Bible")

I think the texts in Paul are much clearer than current discussion would have us believe.

To close this longer-than-usual post, I want to offer four final pastoral observations.

The first relates to Bible **translation**. It is clear that translators have wrestled with the translation of these two terms in Paul, even in different languages, and come up with some very different answers. Ed Oxford talks about how he discovered the history of German translation of key texts in the Old and New Testaments:

> So we went to Leviticus 18:22 and he's translating it for me word for word. In the English where it says "Man shall not lie with man, for it is an abomination," the German version says "Man shall not lie with young boys as he does with a woman, for it is an abomination." I said, "What?! Are you sure?" He said, "Yes!" Then we went to Leviticus 20:13— same thing, "Young boys." So we went to 1 Corinthians to see how they translated *arsenokoitai* (original Greek word) and instead of homosexuals it said, "Boy molesters will not inherit the kingdom of God."

> I then grabbed my facsimile copy of Martin Luther's original German translation from 1534. My friend is reading through it for me and he says, "Ed, this says the same thing!" They use the word *knabenschander*. *Knaben* is boy, *schander* is molester. This word "boy molesters" for the most part carried through the next several centuries of German Bible translations. *Knabenschander* is also in 1 Timothy 1:10. So the interesting thing is, I asked if they ever changed the word arsenokoitai to homosexual in modern translations. So my friend found it and told me, "The first time homosexual appears in a German translation is 1983."

If this is all true, then it is extraordinary. There is simply no reason to translate the Hebrew *zakar* in Lev 18.22 and 20.13 with the term 'young boys' and I know of no English translation that does so. What is happening here is that the translators have conflated the term *arsenokoites* that Paul does use with the later term *paidophthorēseis* that Paul doesn't use—and, seeing the connection with Leviticus, have then read that concern back into the Old Testament! It is a bizarre approach to translation.

Many English translations, using language like 'homosexual abusers' do capture the rhetorical force of Paul's language—but they add a whole lot of contemporary cultural baggage at the same time. Perhaps the best way to translate the terms might be to use 'softies' for the first, capturing the meanings of *malakos* as both 'effeminate' and 'morally weak', and 'men who have sex with men' for *arsenokoites,* reflecting both its etymology and its close connection with Lev 20.13.

The second issue is the **confusion** that has been created in the debate. It suits those who want to see the Church change its teaching for most members of the Church to say 'It is all so complicated, and

the Bible is not really as clear as I thought'. That climate is created by popularised arguments that ignore the whole range of evidence—and give no indication to their readers (who mostly won't know how to assess this) that there are other issues that need to be considered. For example, I don't suppose anyone reading Tallon's article or watching his video will think to ask 'But what is the cultural context of Paul? And how does his view connect with other Jewish critiques of pagan culture?' since there is no hint that this might be an important issue. Atomising the debate—isolating one text from another, and isolating the texts from their context—is a common feature of such arguments, and they lead to confusion.

The third issue is our **decision** in the light of what Paul says. E P Sanders is very interesting in this regard; like many other scholars, whilst he is clear about what Paul means, he does not see Paul's view as in any sense binding on his own views as a Christian.

> Paul's vice lists are generally ignored in church polity and administration. Christian churches contain people who drink too much, who are greedy, who are deceitful, who quarrel, who gossip, who boast, who once rebelled against their parents, and who are foolish. Yet Paul's vice lists condemn them *all*, just as much as they condemn people who engage in homosexual acts (p 372).

Sanders is spot on here: you cannot pick and choose, and if you take Paul seriously on one issue, you must surely take him seriously (or not) on all issues. Sanders' conclusion is to treat them all as non-binding—but of course there is an alternative response available.

The fourth then is the question of our **reception** of gay people in terms of our pastoral response. Sanders makes some very interesting observations about the nature and use of Paul's vice lists.

> Homiletically, vice lists gain rhetorical force partly by length and partly by the equation of relatively minor sins with relatively major ones. It might be quite useful for a preacher to gain the audience's support by condemning major sins (such as adultery and greed), but then to add that there are lots of sins...which are practiced by some of the people in the pews, and that these count as sins too... This has a healthily purgative effect. (p 338).

He also notes that Paul's own pastoral strategy is not effected by the vice lists, since he handles actual examples of sin in a different way. Besides, the clear assumption is that the things he lists are now in the past: 'such *were* some of you. *But*...' (1 Cor 6.11). Sanders sums up:

> The accusations in his vice lists are not actually directed at the sins of his converts at all (p 339).

So Paul's language on this issue does not offer us a pastoral strategy for relating to gay people, within the church or outside. What it does do is tell us clearly Paul's understanding of the moral status of SSS, and with him the view both of Judaism and the early church, and following that most of Christian understanding down the centuries. The heated and (in my view unnecessary) debates about these clear texts not only sows confusion, it also makes gay people feel as though they are the subjects of these debates, which I think is unhelpful all round.

So let's stop constantly debating the meaning of these texts—amongst all exegetical issues in the NT, these are relatively clear. When we do that, we can move on to the more important pastoral issue of how we engage with each other in relationship.

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Matthew Vines' Christian Take on Homosexuality

By Camille Schmidt | July 20, 2015

Matthew Vines is the author of God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships *and is the president and founder of the Reformation Project. He is widely known for his viral video "The Gay Debate: The Bible and Homosexuality."*

Harvard Political Review: What was your community like growing up?

Matthew Vines: I grew up in a Christian home in Wichita, Kansas so I've pretty much always been a Christian and [my family went to] a conservative evangelical church. It was a good community growing up but less so when I came out because there was no precedent for acceptance of those people—it's a totally different world than Harvard.

HPR: Was anyone else in your hometown gay?

MV: I'd had a friend and he came out when he was in college. No one had ever talked about him after that—it was like he had been erased from the community. My mom was in tears for about three days when she found out he was gay. There's a reason I didn't think about myself being gay, because I did not want to be gay.

HPR: Did you believe that being gay was a sin?

MV: When I actually met gay people in high school my views began to moderate. It was important to be kind to people and respect people. When I went off to Harvard I did not have an opinion on same-sex marriage, which I thought was pretty progressive. In the church context I grew up in thats about as progressive as you can get without becoming disconnected from everyone.

HPR: What changed?

MV: I wasn't opposed to same sex marriage, but I didn't have a position on it. I don't think that's acceptable now because it's a justice issue—not just same sex marriage, but a lot of LGBT issues are justice issues and you should care about them a lot. It's not a neutral thing like "live and let live." Sure, to a point "live and let live," but when there is significant oppression and discrimination of this entire group of people you should really care and be passionate about it.

HPR: Did your time at Harvard have anything to do with you changing your views on homosexuality?

MV: I actually joined the only groups that would not be supportive if I came out my freshman year, which were the conservative Christian groups. But my first year there I sat down with one of the leaders and said "Heres the thing: I love Jesus and I love God and I always have, but I also cannot be opposed to same-sex marriage anymore because I think it's wrong to be against it. Is there still space for me in this community?" And she said yes; she might not fully agree with me but there is still space for me there. So that was really good. It was six months later when I started thinking I might be gay. The answer was obvious when I thought about it—I just didn't want to think about it. I went home for Christmas and came out to my parents which was pretty terrifying.

HPR: How did your parents react?

MV: They responded about as well as they could've given what they believed at the time. They told me they loved me and were glad that I told them. My dad in particular did not know what to think. It had never once crossed his mind that I might be gay. He just figured that he raised me well and I was a good kid so therefore I would not be gay. He didn't know any openly gay people before I came out to him so it was easy to hold on to poorly informed opinions. So I took off an entire semester from Harvard just to work through the conversation with my parents and study the Bible with them. That was my dad's big hang up: his concern about passages in the Bible that refer to same sex marriage. He committed to me that he would learn and listen but he was hoping I would end up changing my opinion.

HPR: He hoped you'd change your opinion to think that you weren't gay or that it was a sin?

MV: That it was a sin. But what ended up happening is that he ended up changing his mind. Because we studied the Bible together and what he expected and assumed some of these texts were about is not what he ended up finding upon closer inspection. And both of my parents today are very supportive of me and are passionate, vocal advocates for me and for other LGBT people here in Wichita, which I think is awesome. There are a number of Christians who would not respond the way my parents did when I came out to them. And they wouldn't even give their child a hearing and would just completely cut off and reject them. But there are a lot of evangelical and conservative Christians who in that moment would be willing to listen to and consider a different perspective—but they have to be shown what that different perspective of the Bible looks like. It's all about equipping other LGBT Christians to actually empower themselves to persuade their parents to think differently when they are coming out to

them—and from that family perspective to grow greater support in their community.

HPR: Where do you think the bigotry comes from?

MV: The default position that everyone started with 50 years ago is that same-sex relationships are wrong and probably should be criminal. We've seen this default position change with almost everyone except in the conservative Christian community. I think we are temperamentally resistant to change of all kind—this isn't a put down, I think that can be a great thing—but I think the main reason is because of their theology. Even [conservative Christians] may be slowly gaining a greater, slowly more nuanced idea of what same-sex relationships can look like. Their views are filtered through a hyper-certainty around the Bible—the Bible is the bedrock of their lives so it's hard to have an experience that can override the Bible. I'm showing people how to fully uphold the authority of the Bible and also support same-sex marriage.

HPR: What is the key to accelerating the movement?

MV: The most important group is what I call "the silent sympathizers." In any Christian community in America, no matter how conservative, these people exist. These are the people that, when you come out to them, will tell you in hushed tones that they support you and don't think being gay is a sin, but they don't say it publicly. Part of the reason they don't say that publicly is that they don't know how to talk about the Bible in a way that still fits into the theological framework of their community. If you just say you don't see being gay as a sin anymore, to still have respect and recognition in the community, you have to be able to defend your perspective through the Bible. If you can identify and empower the silent majority of evangelicals who are silent sympathizers with words to give voice to their opinions, then

they can remain a part of the community while holding a different opinion. And that's the way that you then access and persuade the other members —it's arguments and relationships.

HPR: Can you tell me a bit about the Reformation Project?

MV: It's all about equipping LGBT-affirming christians with the Bible-based tools they need to change their non-affirming churches. We run conferences all over the country, we just did one in Atlanta. We actually made the front page of the NYTimes.

HPR: Many of the people you come into contact with on the Reformation Project and discussing *God and the Gay Christian* must have hostile feelings towards not only your topic, but also your orientation and thus you. In what ways do you attempt to connect with people who have such different views?

MV: Typical language in secular circles is pro-gay and anti gay, pro-LGBT and anti-LGBT, but we don't use that language because most of the people whose minds we are seeking to change recoil at being called anti-gay and don't appreciate that and so we just use language that's most effective at opening up further conversation instead of shutting it down ... I don't think it's okay to be against same-sex relationships, but I always want to come from a place where I can honor and respect other peoples' motives and assume the best in people and then go from there.

HPR: I'm curious about your thoughts on the timelessness of Christianity. You have said that you don't feel free to set aside parts of the Bible that make you uncomfortable. Yet there are many sections that have led people to take both homophobic and sexist doctrines. Do you feel that Christianity, and thus the scriptures themselves, need to be updated? Or do peoples' interpretations of the scriptures need to be updated?

MV: I'm not interested in saying we need to update the Bible. I think Christians need to properly interpret the bible on these levels. We now have a different lens to look at scriptural passages the same way Christians had a different lens of looking at Bible after the telescope was invented in the 17th century. At that point Christians no longer could hold onto the idea that the earth was the center of the universe because they took the evidence from the telescope and then reinterpreted passages that talked about the sun, the earth, the heavens, the moon and came up with a more accurate reading.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

Image credit: Office of Matthew Vines

HOMOSEXUALITY IN THE CHURCH

Both Sides of the Debate

Jeffrey S. Siker, editor

1994
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Louisville, Kentucky

1. Awaiting the Redemption of Our Bodies: The Witness of Scripture Concerning Homosexuality

RICHARD B. HAYS

SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE

Gary came to New Haven in the summer of 1989 to say a proper farewell. My best friend from undergraduate years at Yale, he was dying of AIDS. While he was still able to travel, my family and I invited him to come visit us one more time.

During the week he stayed with us, we went to films together (*Field of Dreams* and *Dead Poets Society*), we drank wine and laughed, we had long sober talks about politics and literature and the gospel and sex and such. Above all, we listened to music. Some of it was nostalgic music: the record of our college singing group, which Gary had directed with passionate precision; music of the '60s, recalling the years when we marched together against the Vietnam War—Beatles, Byrds, Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell. Some of it was music more recently discovered: I introduced him to R.E.M. and the Indigo Girls; he introduced me to Johannes Ockeghem's *Requiem* (*Missa pro defunctis*). As always, his aesthetic sense was fine and austere; as always, he was determined to face the truth, even in the shadow of death.

We prayed together often that week, and we talked theology. It became clear that Gary had come not only to say goodbye but also to think hard, before God, about the relation between his homosexuality and his Christian faith. He was angry at the self-affirming gay Christian groups, because he regarded his own condition as more complex and tragic than their apologetic stance could acknowledge. He also worried that the gay subculture encouraged homosexual believers to "draw their identity from their sexuality" and thus to shift the ground of their identity subtly and idolatrously away from God.

For more than twenty years, Gary had grappled with his homosexuality, experiencing it as a compulsion and an affliction. Now, as he faced

death, he wanted to talk it all through again from the beginning, because he knew my love for him and trusted me to speak without dissembling. For Gary, there was no time to dance around the hard questions. As Dylan had urged, "Let us not talk falsely now; the hour is getting late."

In particular, Gary wanted to discuss the biblical passages that deal with homosexual acts. Among Gary's many gifts was his skill as a reader of texts. After leaving Yale and helping to found a community-based Christian theater group in Toronto, he had eventually completed a master's degree in French literature. Though he was not trained as a biblical exegete, he knew the difference between sensitive readings and tendentious ones. He had read hopefully through the standard bibliography of the burgeoning movement advocating the acceptance of homosexuality in the church: John J. McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual*; James B. Nelson, *Embodiment*; Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?*; John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*. In the end, he came away disappointed, believing that these authors, despite their good intentions, had imposed a wishful interpretation on the biblical passages. However much he wanted to believe that the Bible did not condemn homosexuality, he would not violate his own stubborn intellectual integrity by pretending to find their arguments persuasive.

The more we talked, the more we found our perspectives interlocking. Both of us had serious misgivings about the mounting pressure for the church to recognize homosexuality as a legitimate Christian lifestyle. As a New Testament scholar, I was concerned about certain questionable exegetical and theological strategies of the gay apologists. Gary, as a homosexual Christian, believed that their writings did justice neither to the biblical texts nor to the depressing reality of the gay subculture that he had moved in and out of for twenty years.

We concluded that our witnesses were complementary and that we had a word to speak to the churches. The public discussion of this matter has been dominated by insistently ideological voices: on one side, gay rights activists demanding the church's unqualified acceptance of homosexuality; on the other, unqualified homophobic condemnation of homosexual Christians. Gary and I agreed that we should try to encourage a more nuanced discourse within the community of faith. He was going to write an article about his own experience, reflecting on his struggle to live as a faithful Christian wracked by a sexual orientation that he believed to be incommensurate with the teaching of scripture, and I agreed to write a response to it.

Tragically, Gary soon became too sick to carry out his intention. His last letter to me was an effort to get some of his thoughts on paper while he was still able to write. By May of 1990 he was dead.

This article, then, is an act of keeping covenant with a beloved brother in Christ who will not speak again on this side of the resurrection. I commit it to print sorrowfully aware that it will outrage some. At the same time, I commit it to print praying that it will encourage others as Gary was encouraged and that it will foster compassionate and carefully reasoned theological reflection within the community of faith.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

A theological discussion of homosexuality must proceed through a series of widening circles. Beginning at the center, we must consider the biblical texts that explicitly say something about homosexuality. Then we must consider how these texts are to be assessed within a wider biblical framework and in relation to other factors (scientific evidence, changing social realities, etc.). Finally, we must ask what the church should do in light of scripture and in response to the issues confronting us.

The Bible hardly ever discusses homosexual behavior. There are perhaps half a dozen brief references to it in all of scripture. In terms of emphasis, it is a minor concern, in contrast, for example, to economic injustice. What the Bible does say should be heeded carefully, but any ethic that intends to be biblical will seek to get the accents in the right places. (Would that the passion presently being expended in the church over the question of homosexuality were devoted instead to urging the wealthy to share with the poor! Some of the most urgent champions of "biblical morality" on sexual matters become strangely equivocal when the discussion turns to the New Testament's teachings about possessions.)

Genesis 19:1–29

The notorious story of Sodom and Gomorrah—often cited in connection with homosexuality—is actually irrelevant to the topic. The "men of Sodom" come pounding on Lot's door, apparently with the intention of gang-raping Lot's two visitors, who, as we readers know, are actually angels. The angels rescue Lot and his family and pronounce destruction on the city. The gang-rape scenario exemplifies the wickedness of the city, but there is nothing in the passage pertinent to a judgment about the morality of consensual homosexual intercourse. Indeed, there is nothing in the rest of the biblical tradition, save an obscure reference in Jude 7, to suggest that the sin of Sodom was particularly identified with sexual misconduct of any kind. In fact, the clearest statement about the sin of Sodom is to be found in an oracle of the prophet Ezekiel: "This

was the guilt of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy" (Ezek. 16:49).

Leviticus 18:22; 20:13

The few biblical texts that do address the topic of homosexual behavior, however, are unambiguously and unremittingly negative in their judgment. The Holiness Code in Leviticus explicitly prohibits male homosexual intercourse: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination" (Lev. 18:22). In Lev. 20:10–16, the same act is listed as one of a series of sexual offenses—along with adultery, incest, and bestiality—that are punishable by death. It is worth noting that the *act* of "lying with a male as with a woman" is categorically proscribed: motives for the act are not treated as a morally significant factor.

Quoting a law from Leviticus, of course, does not settle the question for Christian ethics. The Old Testament contains many prohibitions and commandments that have, ever since the first century, generally been disregarded or deemed obsolete by the church, most notably rules concerning circumcision and dietary practices. Some ethicists have argued that the prohibition of homosexuality is similarly superseded for Christians: it is merely part of the Old Testament's ritual "purity rules" and therefore morally irrelevant today.

The Old Testament, however, makes no systematic distinction between ritual law and moral law. The same section of the Holiness Code also contains, for instance, the prohibition of incest (Lev. 18:6–18). Is that a purity law or a moral law? Leviticus makes no distinction in principle. In each case, the church is faced with the task of discerning whether Israel's traditional norms remain in force for the new community of Jesus' followers.

1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10

The early church did, in fact, consistently adopt the Old Testament's teaching on matters of sexual morality and on homosexual acts in particular. In 1 Cor. 6:9 and 1 Tim. 1:10, we find homosexuals included in lists of persons who do things unacceptable to God.

In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul, exasperated with the Corinthians—some of whom apparently believe themselves to have entered a spiritually exalted state in which the moral rules of their old existence no longer apply to them (cf. 1 Cor. 4:8, 5:1–2, 8:1–9)—confronts them with a blunt rhetorical question: "Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God?" He then gives an illustrative list of the

sorts of persons he means: "fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, *malakoi*, *arsenokoitai*, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers."

I have left the terms pertinent to the present issue untranslated, because their translation has been disputed recently by Boswell and others. The word *malakoi* is not a technical term meaning "homosexuals" (no such term existed either in Greek or in Hebrew), but it appears often in Hellenistic Greek as pejorative slang to describe the "passive" partners—often young boys—in homosexual activity. The other word, *arsenokoitai*, is not found in any extant Greek text earlier than 1 Corinthians. Some scholars have suggested that its meaning is uncertain, but Robin Scroggs[1] has shown that the word is a translation of the Hebrew *mishkav zakur* ("lying with a male"), derived directly from Lev. 18:22 and 20:13 and used in rabbinic texts to refer to homosexual intercourse. The Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) of Lev. 20:13 reads, "Whoever lies with a man as with a woman (*meta arsenos koitēn gynaikos*), they have both done an abomination." This is almost certainly the idiom from which the noun *arsenokoitai* was coined. Thus, Paul's use of the term presupposes and reaffirms the Holiness Code's condemnation of homosexual acts.

In 1 Cor. 6:11, Paul asserts that the sinful behaviors catalogued in the vice list were formerly practiced by some of the Corinthians. Now, however, since they have been transferred into the sphere of Christ's lordship, they ought to have left these practices behind: "This is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God." The remainder of the chapter (1 Cor. 6:12–20) counsels the Corinthians to glorify God in their bodies because they belong now to God and no longer to themselves.

The 1 Timothy passage includes *arsenokoitai* in a list of "the lawless and disobedient," whose behavior is specified in a vice list that includes everything from lying to murdering one's parents, under the rubric of actions "contrary to sound teaching according to the glorious gospel." Here again, the Old Testament prohibition is presupposed, but the context offers little discussion of sexual morality as such.

Romans 1:18–32

The most crucial text for Christian ethics concerning homosexuality remains Romans 1, because this is the only passage in the New Testament that places the condemnation of homosexual behavior in an explicitly theological context.

> *Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they*

> *exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator. . . . For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their own error (Rom. 1:24–27).*

(This is, incidentally, the only passage in the Bible that refers to lesbian sexual relations.)

Because the passage is often cited and frequently misunderstood, an examination of its place in Paul's argument is necessary. The aim of Romans 1 is not to teach a code of sexual ethics; nor is the passage a warning of God's judgment against those who are guilty of particular sins. Rather, Paul is offering a *diagnosis* of the disordered human condition: he adduces the fact of widespread homosexual behavior as evidence that human beings are indeed in rebellion against their creator. The fundamental human sin is the refusal to honor God and give God thanks (1:21); consequently, God's wrath takes the form of letting human idolatry run its own self-destructive course. Homosexuality, then, is not a *provocation* of "the wrath of God" (Rom. 1:18); rather, it is a *consequence* of God's decision to "give up" rebellious creatures to follow their own futile thinking and desires. The unrighteous behavior catalogued in Rom. 1:26–31 is a list of *symptoms*: the underlying sickness of humanity as a whole, Jews and Greeks alike, is that they have turned away from God and fallen under the power of sin (cf. Rom. 3:9).

When this context is kept clearly in view, several important observations follow:

1. Paul is not describing the individual life histories of pagan sinners; not every pagan has first known the true God of Israel and then chosen to turn away into idolatry. When Paul writes, "they exchanged the truth about God for a lie," he is giving a global account of the universal fall of humanity. This fall is manifested continually in the various ungodly behaviors listed in vv. 24–31.

2. Paul singles out homosexual intercourse for special attention because he regards it as providing a particularly graphic image of the way in which human fallenness distorts God's created order. God the creator made man and woman for each other, to cleave together, to be fruitful and multiply. When human beings engage in homosexual activity, they enact an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual reality: the rejection of the Creator's design. They *embody* the spiritual condition of those who have "exchanged the truth about God for a lie."

3. Homosexual acts are not, however, specially reprehensible sins; they are no worse than any of the other manifestations of human unrighteousness listed in the passage (vv. 29–31), no worse in principle than covetousness or gossip or disrespect for parents.

4. Homosexual activity will not *incur* God's punishment: it is its own punishment, an "anti-reward." Paul here simply echoes a traditional Jewish idea. The Wisdom of Solomon, an intertestamental writing that has surely influenced Paul's thinking in Romans 1, puts it like this: "Therefore those who in folly of life lived unrighteously [God] tormented through their own abominations" (Wisd. Sol. 12:1).

Repeated again and again in recent debate is the claim that Paul condemns only homosexual acts committed promiscuously by heterosexual persons—because they "*exchanged* natural intercourse for unnatural." Paul's negative judgment, so the argument goes, does *not* apply to persons who are "naturally" of homosexual orientation. This interpretation, however, is untenable. The "exchange" is not a matter of individual life-decisions; rather, it is Paul's characterization of the fallen condition of the pagan world. In any case, neither Paul nor anyone else in antiquity had a concept of "sexual orientation." To introduce this concept into the passage (by suggesting that Paul disapproves only of those who act contrary to their individual sexual orientations) is to lapse into an anachronism.[2] The fact is that Paul treats *all* homosexual activity as prima facie evidence of humanity's tragic confusion and alienation from God the Creator.

One more thing must be said: Rom. 1:18–32 performs a homiletical sting operation. The passage builds a crescendo of condemnation, declaring God's wrath upon human unrighteousness, using rhetoric characteristic of Jewish polemic against Gentile immorality. It whips the reader into a frenzy of indignation against others: those unbelievers, those idol worshipers, those immoral enemies of God. But then, in Rom. 2:1, the sting strikes: "Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things."

We all stand without excuse under God's judgment. Self-righteous judgment of homosexuality is just as sinful as the homosexual behavior itself. That does not mean that Paul is disingenuous in his rejection of homosexual acts and all the other sinful activities mentioned in Romans 1; all the evils listed there remain evils. But no one should presume to be above God's judgment; all of us stand in radical need of God's mercy. That warning must temper the tone of our debate about homosexuality.

THE WIDER BIBLICAL FRAMEWORK

Though only a few biblical texts speak of homoerotic activity, all of them express unqualified disapproval. In this respect, the issue of homo-

sexuality differs significantly from matters such as slavery or the subordination of women, concerning which the Bible contains internal tensions and counterposed witnesses. No theological consideration of homosexuality can rest content, however, with a short list of passages that treat the matter explicitly. We must consider how Scripture frames the discussion more broadly. To place the prohibition of homosexual activity in a canonical context, we should keep in mind at least the following factors in the biblical portrayal of human existence before God.

1. *God's creative intention for human sexuality.* From Genesis 1 onwards, scripture affirms repeatedly that God has made man and woman for one another and that our sexual desires rightly find fulfillment within heterosexual marriage (see, for instance, Mark 10:2–9, 1 Thess. 4:3–8, 1 Cor. 7:1–9, Eph. 5:21–33, Heb. 13:4). This picture of marriage provides the positive backdrop against which the Bible's few emphatic negations of homosexuality must be read.

2. *The fallen human condition.* The biblical analysis of the human predicament, most sharply expressed in Pauline theology, offers a subtle account of human bondage to sin. As great-grandchildren of the Enlightenment, we like to think of ourselves as free moral agents, choosing rationally among possible actions, but Scripture unmasks that cheerful illusion and teaches us that we are deeply infected by the tendency to self-deception. Romans 1 depicts humanity in a state of self-affirming confusion: "*They became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools. . . . They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but applaud others who practice them*" (Rom. 1:21–22, 32). Once in the fallen state, we are not free not to sin; we are "slaves of sin" (Rom. 6:17), which distorts our perceptions, overpowers our will, and renders us incapable of obedience (Romans 7). *Redemption* (a word that means "being emancipated from slavery") is God's act of liberation, setting us free from the power of sin and placing us within the sphere of God's transforming power for righteousness (Rom. 6:20–22, 8:1–11, cf. 12:1–2).

Thus we must reject the apparently common-sense assumption that only freely chosen acts are morally culpable. Quite the reverse: The very nature of sin is that it is not freely chosen. That is what it means to live "in the flesh" in a fallen creation. We are in bondage to sin but still accountable to God's righteous judgment of our actions. In light of this theological anthropology, it cannot be maintained that a homosexual orientation is morally neutral because it is involuntary.

3. *The eschatological character of Christian existence.* The Christian community lives in a time of tension between "already" and "not yet."

Already we have the joy of the Holy Spirit; already we experience the transforming grace of God. But at the same time, we do not yet experience the fullness of redemption: we walk by faith, not by sight. The creation groans in pain and bondage, "and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom. 8:23). This means, among other things, that Christians, set free from the power of sin through Christ's death, must continue to struggle to live faithfully in the present time. The "redemption of our bodies" remains a future hope; final transformation of our fallen physical state awaits the resurrection. Consequently, in the interim some may find disciplined abstinence the only viable alternative to disordered sexuality.

4. *Demythologizing the idolatry of sex.* The Bible undercuts our cultural obsession with sexual fulfillment. Scripture, along with many subsequent generations of faithful Christians, bears witness that lives of freedom, joy, and service are possible without sexual relations. Indeed, however odd it may seem to contemporary sensibilities, some New Testament passages (Matt. 19:10–12, 1 Corinthians 7) clearly commend the celibate life as a way of faithfulness.

BIBLICAL AUTHORITY AND OTHER VOICES

But what about the authority of the Bible? Are Leviticus and Paul the apostle trustworthy guides on sexual ethics? We must still consider how the Bible's teaching is to be weighted in relation to other sources of moral wisdom. An adequate discussion of this problem would be very long indeed. For the present, I offer only some brief reflections as places to start the discussion.

1. *The Christian tradition.* Far more emphatically than scripture itself, the moral teaching tradition of the Christian church has for more than nineteen hundred years declared homosexual behavior to be contrary to the will of God. Only within the past twenty years has any serious question been raised about the church's universal prohibition of such conduct. If anything, a passage like Romans 1 might serve to moderate the tradition's harsh judgments. (John Chrysostom, for example, a brilliant and influential theologian of the fourth century, declared that homosexual intercourse was a sin worse than fornication, worse even than murder. Surely the biblical passages give no support to such a claim.) In any case, it is impossible to construct an argument for acceptance of homosexuality by juxtaposing the authority of tradition to the authority of Scripture. The result of the juxtaposition is to strengthen the Bible's prohibitions.

2. *Reason and scientific evidence.* Here the picture is cloudy. Some

studies have claimed that as much as 10 percent of the population is inclined to same-sex erotic preference, and some theorists hold that homosexual orientation is innate (or formed by a very early age) and unchangeable. This is the opinion espoused by most advocates of full acceptance of homosexuality in the church: If homosexual orientation is a genetically determined trait, so the argument goes, then any disapproval of it is a form of discrimination analogous to racism.

Others, however, regard homosexual orientation as a form of developmental maladjustment or "symbolic confusion." Some therapists claim significant clinical success rates in helping homosexual persons develop a heterosexual orientation; others challenge such claims. A major cross-cultural study recently published by David F. Greenberg,[3] professor of sociology at New York University, contends that homosexual identity is socially constructed rather than inborn. According to Greenberg, the "essentialist" view of sexual orientation is a fallacy.

In one sense, however, the etiology of homosexual orientation is not a significant factor for the formation of normative Christian ethics. We need not take sides in the debate of nature versus culture. Even if it could be shown that same-sex preference is somehow genetically programmed, that would not necessarily make homosexual behavior morally appropriate. Surely Christian ethics does not want to hold that all inborn traits are good and desirable. The analogy of alcoholism, while only an analogy, is perhaps helpful: A considerable body of evidence suggests that some people are born with a predisposition to alcoholism. Once exposed to alcohol, they experience an attraction so powerful that it can be counteracted only by careful counseling, community support, and total abstinence. We now conventionally speak of alcoholism as a disease and carefully distinguish our disapproval of the behavior associated with it from our loving support of the person afflicted by it. Perhaps homoerotic attraction should be treated similarly.

The argument from statistical incidence of homosexual behavior is even less useful in normative ethical deliberation. Even if 10 percent of the people in the United States should declare themselves to be of homosexual orientation (and that figure is a doubtful one), that would not settle the *normative* issue; it is impossible to argue simply from an "is" to an "ought." If Paul were shown the poll results, he would reply sadly, "Indeed, the power of sin is rampant in the world."

3. *The experience of the community of faith.* This is the place where the advocates of homosexuality in the church have their most serious case. Scroggs argues that the New Testament's condemnation of homosexuality applies only to a certain "model" of exploitative pederasty that was common in Hellenistic culture; hence, it is not applicable to the modern world's experience of mutual, loving homosexual relationships. I think that Scroggs's position fails to reckon adequately with Romans 1, where the relations are not described as pederastic and where Paul's disapproval has nothing to do with exploitation.

But the fact remains that there are numerous homosexual Christians—like my friend Gary and some of my ablest students at Yale—whose lives show signs of the presence of God, whose work in ministry is genuine and effective. How is such experiential evidence to be assessed? Should we, like the earliest Jewish Christians who hesitated to accept "unclean" Gentiles into the community of faith, acknowledge the work of the Spirit and say, "Who are we to stand in the way of what God is doing" (cf. Acts 10:1–11:18)? Or should we see this as one more instance of a truth that all of us in ministry know sadly about ourselves: "We have this treasure in earthen vessels"? God gives the Spirit to broken people and ministers grace even through us sinners, without thereby endorsing our sin.

In view of the considerable uncertainty surrounding the scientific and experiential evidence, in view of our culture's present swirling confusion about gender roles, in view of our propensity for self-deception, I think it prudent and necessary to let the univocal testimony of Scripture and the Christian tradition order the life of the church on this painfully controversial matter. We must affirm that the New Testament tells us the truth about ourselves as sinners and as God's sexual creatures: Marriage between man and woman is the normative form for human sexual fulfillment, and homosexuality is one among many tragic signs that we are a broken people, alienated from God's loving purpose.

PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES: LIVING UNDER THE CROSS

How then shall we respond in the church to the pastoral and political realities of our time? Having said that we cannot condone homosexual behavior, we still find ourselves confronted by complex problems that demand rigorous and compassionate solutions. Those who uphold the biblical teaching against homosexuality must remember Paul's warning in Rom. 2:1–3: We are all "without excuse"; we all stand or fall under God's judgment and mercy. The second thing to be said—as a presupposition for all that follows—is that the church is called to be a fellowship of committed believers, knowing itself to have an identity and vocation distinct from the world.

In what follows, I pose several key issues and venture some discernments. These opinions—based on the exegesis and theological reflec-

tions already set forth in this essay—should be taken as proposals offered to the community of faith, to be judged in light of Scripture and the community's prayerful corporate wisdom.

1. *Should the church support civil rights for homosexuals?* Yes. Any judgment about the church's effort to influence Caesar's social policies requires complex reasoning. There is no reason, however, for the church to single out homosexual persons for malicious discriminatory treatment. Insofar as Christians have done so in the past, we must repent and seek instead to live out the gospel of reconciliation.

2. *Can homosexual persons be members of the Christian church?* This is rather like asking, "Can envious persons be members of the church?" (cf. Rom. 1:29) or "Can alcoholics be members of the church?" Unless we think that the church is a community of sinless perfection, we will have to acknowledge that persons of homosexual orientation (granting, as I am willing to do, that there is such a thing) are welcome along with other sinners in the company of those who trust in the God who justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5). If they are not welcome, I will have to walk out the door along with them, leaving in the sanctuary only those entitled to cast the first stone.

3. *Is it Christianly appropriate for homosexual Christians to maintain a homosexual lifestyle?* No. The only one who was entitled to cast a stone instead charged the recipient of his mercy to "go and sin no more." It is no more appropriate for homosexual Christians to persist in a homosexual lifestyle than it would be for heterosexual Christians to maintain a lifestyle of fornication or adultery. (Insofar as the church fails to teach clearly about heterosexual chastity outside of marriage, its disapproval of homosexual coupling will appear arbitrary and biased.) Unless they are able to change their orientation and enter a heterosexual marriage relationship, homosexual Christians should seek to live lives of disciplined sexual abstinence.

Despite the smooth illusions perpetrated by American mass culture, sexual gratification is not a sacred right, and celibacy is not a fate worse than death. Here the Catholic tradition has something to teach those of us raised in Protestant communities. While mandatory priestly celibacy is unbiblical, a life of sexual abstinence can promote "good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:35). It is worth noting that 1 Cor. 7:8–9, 25–40 commends celibacy as an option for everyone, not just for a special caste of ordained leaders. Within the church, we should work diligently to recover the dignity and value of the single life.

My friend Gary, in his final letter to me, wrote urgently of the imperatives of discipleship: "*Are homosexuals to be excluded from the community of faith? Certainly not. But anyone who joins such a community should know that it is a place of transformation, of discipline, of learning,*

and not merely a place to be comforted or indulged." The community demands that its members pursue holiness, while it also sustains the challenging process of character formation that is necessary for Jesus' disciples. The church must be a community whose life together provides true friendship and emotional support for persons seeking an alternative to the gay subculture, as well as for heterosexually oriented single persons. In this respect, as in so many others, the church can fulfill its vocation only by living as a countercommunity in the world.

4. *Should the church sanction and bless homosexual unions?* No. The church should continue to teach—as it always has—that there are two possible ways for God's human sexual creatures to live well-ordered lives of faithful discipleship: heterosexual marriage and sexual abstinence.

5. *Should homosexual Christians expect to change their orientation?* This tough question must be answered in the critical framework of New Testament eschatology. On the one hand, the transforming power of the Spirit really is present in our midst; the testimonies of those who claim to have been healed and transformed into a heterosexual orientation should be taken seriously. "He breaks the power of canceled sin; he sets the prisoner free." If we do not continue to live with that hope, we may be hoping for too little from God. On the other hand, the "not yet" looms large; the testimonies of those like Gary who pray and struggle in Christian community and seek healing unsuccessfully for years must be taken with no less seriousness. Perhaps for many the best outcome attainable in this time between the times will be a life of disciplined abstinence, free from obsessive lust. (Exactly the same standard would apply for unmarried persons of heterosexual orientation.) That seems to be the spiritual condition Gary reached near the end of his life: "*Since All Saints Day I have felt myself being transformed. I no longer consider myself homosexual. Many would say, big deal, you're 42 . . . and are dying of* AIDS. *Big sacrifice. No, I didn't do this of my will, of an effort to improve myself, to make myself acceptable to God. No, he did this for me. I feel a great weight has been lifted off me. I have not turned 'straight.' I guess I'm like St. Paul's phrase, a eunuch for Christ.*"[4]

6. *Should homosexuals be ordained?* I save this question deliberately for last, where it belongs. It is unfortunate that the battle line has been drawn in the denominations at the question of ordination of homosexuals. The ensuing struggle has had the horrible effect of reinforcing a double standard for "clergy" and "lay" morality; it would be far better to articulate a single set of moral norms that apply to all Jesus' followers. Strictures against homosexuality belong in the church's moral catachesis, not in its ordination requirements. It is arbitrary to single out homosexuality as a special sin that precludes ordination. (Certainly the

New Testament does not do this.) The church has no analogous special rules to exclude from ordination the greedy or the self-righteous. Such matters are left to the discernment of the bodies charged with examining candidates for ordination; these bodies must determine whether the individual candidate has the gifts and graces requisite for ministry. In any event, a person of homosexual orientation seeking to live a life of disciplined abstinence would clearly be an appropriate candidate for ordination.

We live, then, as a community that embraces sinners as Jesus did, without waiving God's righteousness. We live confessing that God's grace claims us out of confusion and alienation and sets about making us whole. We live knowing that wholeness remains a hope rather than an attainment in this life. The homosexual Christians in our midst may teach us something about our true condition as people living between the cross and the final redemption of our bodies.

In the midst of a culture that worships self-gratification and a church that preaches a false Jesus who panders to our desires, those who seek the narrow way of obedience have a powerful word to speak. Just as Paul saw in pagan homosexuality a symbol of human fallenness, so I saw conversely in Gary, as I have seen in other homosexual friends and colleagues, a symbol of God's power made perfect in weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). Gary knew through experience the bitter power of sin in a twisted world, and he trusted in God's love anyway. Thus he embodied the "sufferings of this present time" of which Paul speaks in Romans 8: living in the joyful freedom of the "first fruits of the Spirit," even while groaning along with a creation in bondage to decay.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What does it mean to approach the biblical writings both seriously and responsibly?
2. How do you sort through the various teachings in the Bible regarding human sexuality?
3. What do you think the Bible has to say regarding homosexuality? Why? What do the biblical authors mean by "homosexuality"? What are the problems in discerning a biblical approach to homosexuality?
4. Where do you find yourself agreeing or disagreeing with Hays's interpretations of the biblical passages? Why?
5. To what extent are biblical passages on human sexuality pertinent to contemporary discussions of homosexuality? Why?

NOTES

1. Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 106–08.

2. The expression *para physin* ("contrary to nature"), used here by Paul, is the standard terminology in dozens of ancient texts for referring to homoerotic acts. Readers interested in technical details and citations of pertinent ancient sources should see my article "Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell's Exegesis of Romans 1" in the *Journal of Religious Ethics* 14/1 (Spring 1986): 184–215.

3. David F. Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

4. Actually, Gary's phrase rather elegantly conflates 1 Cor. 4:10 with Matt. 19:12.

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WASHED AND STILL WAITING: AN EVANGELICAL APPROACH TO HOMOSEXUALITY

WESLEY HILL*

Abstract: *Many same-sex attracted Christians will find themselves pursuing lives of faithful celibacy in the absence of any diminishment of their attractions. In order to help them flourish under these conditions, evangelical churches should pursue at least three avenues of assistance. First, churches should offer robust biblical affirmation of the celibate vocation, encouraging committed single believers to understand their celibacy as a calling. Second, churches should offer concrete, practical guidance on how to live the celibate life. And finally, churches should promote practices of spiritual friendship and kinship, in which single same-sex attracted Christians can be reminded that romantic partnerships are not the only place to give and receive genuine love.*

Key Words: *Homosexuality, same-sex attraction, celibacy, singleness, friendship.*

In 2010, I published a book titled *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality.*[1] The book contained elements of theology and biblical exposition, but it also belonged in the genre of memoir—"theological memoir," as my publisher called it—insofar as it aimed to reflect on the meaning of my life as a single, sexually abstinent, same-sex-attracted Christian believer.

At the time I began writing the manuscript for that book, I intended to try to fill a gap in existing literature on the topic. I was conscious of how my personal narrative put me out of step with many of my fellow Christians. On the one hand, I was not able to locate myself in what the Princeton Seminary theologian William Stacy Johnson calls the "celebration," "liberation," or "consecration" paradigms, according to which committed same-sex sexual unions should be affirmed as good, presented as paradigms of social justice in the struggle against inequality, and fully blessed and sanctified in the churches.[2] As I wrote,

> My story is very different from other stories told by people wearing the same designation—"homosexual Christian"—that I wear. Many in the church—more so in the mainline denominations than the evangelical ones, though that could soon change—tell stories of "homosexual holiness." The authors of these narratives profess a deep faith in Christ and claim a powerful experience of the Holy Spirit precisely *in* and *through* their homosexual practice. According to these Christians, their homosexuality is an expression of holiness, a symbol and con-

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[1] Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010).

[2] William Stacy Johnson, *A Time to Embrace: Same-Sex Relationships in Religion, Law, and Politics* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 46.

> duit of God's grace in their lives. My own story, by contrast, is a story of feeling spiritually hindered, rather than helped, by my homosexuality. Another way to say it would be to say that my story testifies to the truth of the position the Christian church has held with almost total unanimity throughout the centuries—namely, that homosexuality was not God's original creative intention for humanity, that it is, on the contrary, a tragic sign of human nature and relationships being fractured by sin, and therefore that homosexual practice goes against God's express will for all human beings, especially those who trust in Christ.

On the other hand, though, I was equally unable to locate myself in the paradigm of "deliverance from" or "diminishment of" my same-sex attractions. Again, to quote my book: "Unlike some, I have never experienced a dramatic, healing reversal of my homosexual orientation. In other words, God's presence in my life has not meant that I have become heterosexual." Although I did not and still do not want to dispute that some same-sex-attracted persons experience what have been described as "significant shifts on a continuum of change" and end up marrying a spouse of the opposite sex,[3] I *did* want to testify that such shifting had not been (and still has not been) my own experience. I have remained exclusively attracted to members of my own sex. "So," I wrote,

> this book is neither about how to live faithfully as [a sexually active gay Christian] nor about how to live faithfully as a fully healed or former homosexual. J. I. Packer, commenting on Paul's hopeful word for sexual sinners in 1 Corinthians 6:9–11, says: "With some of the Corinthian Christians, Paul was celebrating the moral empowering of the Holy Spirit in heterosexual terms; with others of the Corinthians, today's homosexuals are called to prove, live out, and celebrate the moral empowering of the Holy Spirit in homosexual terms."[4] This book is about what it means to do that—how, practically, a non-practicing but still-desiring homosexual Christian can "prove, live out, and celebrate" the grace of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit *in homosexual terms.*

Such a project involved me in several interrelated pursuits. In the first place, I had to give some account of the rationality and plausibility of traditional Christian sexual ethics: that marriage is the lifelong, covenantal union of one man and one woman (in accordance with the witness of OT and NT, read canonically); that any sexual conduct outside of that marital bond is proscribed; and that same-sex sexual acts, therefore, are morally wrong in themselves, not merely when they are accompanied by exploitation or violence (as Paul's creational theology in Romans 1 indicates). But, second, I also had to give some account of why I did not therefore opt for trying to change my sexual orientation; why, in more technical language, I did not pursue some strategy of "repair" for my same-sex attractions. And, third, I then

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[3] On this, see Melinda Selmys, *Sexual Authenticity: An Intimate Reflection on Homosexuality and Catholicism* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2009); idem, *Sexual Authenticity: More Reflections* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2013). For the language of "significant shifts," see Stanton L. Jones and Mark A. Yarhouse, *Ex-Gays? A Longitudinal Study of Religiously Mediated Change in Sexual Orientation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007).

[4] J. I. Packer, "Why I Walked," *Christianity Today* 47 (January 21, 2003): 46.

had to try to explain what a "third way" might look like—a way that did not simply "affirm" my sexuality but also did not try to escape from it: in short, I had to describe my life of discipleship to Christ as a life that was both sexually abstinent, or "celibate," and also same-sex-attracted, or "gay." I did my best to describe in precise terms the shape of such a life—how it involved experiences of loneliness, doubt and questioning, ongoing battles with shame and guilt, and a pursuit of community, friendship, and ecclesial service. I wrote about these things in order that other same-sex-attracted Christians might be able to identify with and derive some comfort from my narrative, and in order that pastors and other Christian leaders might be able to learn from my experience how better to minister to gay and lesbian believers in their churches. My shorthand description for this place of tension I was (and am) seeking to occupy is "washed and waiting": forgiven and cleansed in the waters of baptism, per Paul's description in 1 Corinthians 6, and eagerly awaiting the redemption of the body, with the final sanctification and transformation of a fallen sexuality, per Paul's hopeful words in Romans 8. In terms of the "already but not yet" of the NT's inaugurated eschatology, I wanted for myself and for other gay and lesbian believers the identity of being washed in the blood of the Lamb and waiting with endurance for the consummation of the kingdom of God.

A few years after I published my book, a journalist named Jeff Chu wrote a book titled *Does Jesus Really Love Me? A Gay Christian's Pilgrimage in Search of God in America.* Toward the middle of his survey of American Christian gay life, Chu reflects on my *Washed and Waiting.* "When I finished Hill's slim volume," he writes,

> I realized … that I would rather have read *Washed and Still Waiting,* the book that he might be ready to write three decades from now. It's one thing for someone in his twenties to declare publicly his choice of celibacy—admittedly, a difficult, unorthodox, and bold thing. It's entirely another to stand by that decision thirty years on. What are the effects of this kind of long-term chastity? What would life look like for the homosexual who, in his relative youth, chose this?[5]

Taking my cues from Chu's questions, I want in this paper to offer a follow-up reflection on the heels of *Washed and Waiting.* Although I cannot offer the benefit of three decades' hindsight, I do believe I can offer some theological and pastoral reflections on what I now view as necessary for my project to succeed in the long term. In what follows, I want to explore three areas of pastoral theology of particular relevance for celibate Christian believers who are gay or lesbian. First, I will discuss our collective need to recover the dignity of the calling of celibacy in specifically evangelical settings. Second, I will discuss the need for theological reflection on the discipline of stewarding one's sexuality in celibacy. And third, I will describe the churches' need for a theology of celibacy's direction or destination, specifically, in the form of spiritual kinship and friendship.

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[5] Jeff Chu, *Does Jesus Really Love Me? A Gay Christian's Pilgrimage in Search of God in America* (New York: Harper, 2013), 150.

I. THE DIGNITY OF CELIBACY

Turning first to the honor and dignity that we must learn to accord once more to celibacy, I want to note a few features of the evangelical cultural landscape that make it difficult for us to think well about this particular aspect of pastoral and moral theology. The first is simply that celibacy has been underdiscussed and undertheorized in evangelical biblical and theological scholarship. This dearth of resources on the theme is beginning to be redressed, but prior to the publication in 2009 of Christine Colón and Bonnie Field's remarkable book *Singled Out: Why Celibacy Must be Reinvented in Today's Church* and, a year later, of Barry Danylak's book *Redeeming Singleness: How the Storyline of Scripture Affirms the Single Life*,[6] evangelical pastors and teachers had to rely mostly on occasional, piecemeal treatments of the topic that were oriented toward practical considerations and that for the most part eschewed large-scale efforts to locate celibacy on a broad biblical-theological canvas.

Coupled with this lack of attention to the theological rationale for celibacy has been the active effort among some evangelicals to discourage the embrace of singleness among young Christian men in particular. Prominent evangelical pastors have made headlines in recent years for their teaching that marriage ought to be understood not merely as an occasion for sacrificial love but also, barring the discernment that one has a special "gift" for celibacy, as a mandate. As one evangelical pastor put it bluntly, "Biblically, singleness is not ideal."[7]

Alongside this denigration of the vocation of celibacy is the fact that much of the most well-known and widely read evangelical literature on homosexuality has consistently, on the one hand, noted that most same-sex-attracted people who will pursue the Christian vision of chastity will find themselves living as single people, and, on the other hand, declined to offer any extensive treatment of why and how they may do so. For instance, Bob Davies and Lori Rentzel's book *Coming Out of Homosexuality: New Freedom for Men and Women*, originally published in 1993 and widely distributed among "ex-gay" ministries, said this:

> The majority of former homosexuals are single, even those who have been out of same-sex immorality for many years. Some left homosexuality while in their late twenties or older and simply have not found a suitable potential spouse. Others have been married previously and hesitate to initiate a new marriage. Some are content in their singleness and feel no desire to begin dating.[8]

However, in spite of that fact, the authors devoted one and a half pages of their 208-page book to a discussion of celibacy. Meanwhile, they chose to include three

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[6] Christine Colón and Bonnie Field, *Singled Out: Why Celibacy Must Be Reinvented in Today's Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009); Barry Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness: How the Storyline of Scripture Affirms the Single Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010); cf. idem, "Secular Singleness and Paul's Response in 1 Corinthians 7" (Ph.D. diss., University of Cambridge, 2012); idem, *A Biblical Theology of Singleness* (Grove Series B45; Cambridge, UK: Grove, 2007).

[7] Mark Driscoll, *Religion Saves: And Nine Other Misconceptions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 186.

[8] Bob Davies and Lori Rentzel, *Coming Out of Homosexuality: New Freedom for Men and Women* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 179.

chapters, totaling 38 pages (or almost a fifth of the entire book) to giving advice to "former" homosexual people about dating and marriage. Despite recognizing that the majority of their readers will find this material irrelevant, that is where they chose to lay the emphasis. One might compare the similar neglect of—and occasionally outright disdain for—the choice same-sex-attracted Christians may make for a life of celibacy in a prominent 2006 book edited by then-president of Exodus International Alan Chambers.[9]

In these ways, among others, evangelicals have failed to affirm the honor and dignity of the celibate life. This must change if evangelicals are to offer pastoral guidance and assistance to same-sex-attracted believers in our churches.

In the first place, evangelicals must recover the biblical-theological rationale for celibacy. Far from being a concession to the ascetic excesses of the earliest Christians, celibacy in the NT is recognized—and indeed encouraged—as a supremely honorable calling which serves to highlight the destiny of all believers as well as reinforce the gift-character of the marital vocation. As Barry Danylak and others have shown, the logic of the NT's teaching on celibacy gains its force and texture from its eschatological setting. In multiple Hellenistic and Roman philosophies of the first century, and even in the OT, to be a man is to be obligated to raise up offspring and guarantee one's lineage by marrying and fathering children. "Male," in this understanding, is incomplete without "female." To be fully masculine is to define oneself in relation to one's wife. As later Jewish rabbinic teaching would put it hyperbolically, "He who is twenty years old and not yet married spends all of his days in sin" (*b. Qidd.* 29b). Likewise, to be a woman is to be obligated to bear children and establish one's femininity by marrying and devoting oneself to wifely duties. "Female," in this understanding, is incomplete without "male." One becomes a "whole" woman precisely by defining oneself in relation to one's husband and children. Hence the numerous OT laments of barren women (see, e.g., Gen 11:27–30; 29:29–30; Judg 13:2–7; 1 Sam 1:1–8; 2 Kgs 4:14–16).

In the face of these cultural norms, Jesus chooses to practice celibacy himself and commend it to others as a radical sign of the "turning of the ages." In Matthew 19, his commendation of the voluntarily chosen life of a eunuch is said to depend on the kingdom—the newly inbreaking reign—of God (v. 12). As most scholars now recognize, Jesus's practice and encouragement of some of his followers to choose celibacy is not a timeless asceticism but rather an eschatologically charged symbol of the lateness of the hour and the significance of his advent.[10] Because the future resurrection state will involve neither marrying nor being given in marriage (Mark 12:25; Matt 22:30), because death will be no more and therefore there will be

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[9] Alan Chambers, ed., *God's Grace and the Homosexual Next Door: Reaching the Heart of the Gay Men and Women in Your World* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2006), 64. Mike Goeke's chapter speaks of the commendation of celibacy found in Roman Catholic documents on homosexuality as implying "true change is not possible." I owe these observations to Ron Belgau, "Celibacy and Healing"; online: http://spiritualfriendship.org/2013/08/09/celibacy-and-healing.

[10] See Dale C. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 197–210; Robert Song, *Covenant and Calling: Towards a Theology of Same-Sex Relationships* (London: SCM, 2014), 18.

no more need for bearing children and perpetuating the species (Luke 20:35–36), Jesus and his followers begin to live in anticipation of that future in the present time—a future which he himself, the Gospel writers attest, inaugurates by his death and resurrection.

Subsequently, the apostle Paul, as well, makes a place for singleness—not as a temporary state on the way to marriage but as an honorable state that one might permanently accept, a vocation worthy of equal honor alongside marriage. As he puts it to the Corinthians, "He who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better" (1 Cor 7:38). The turning of the ages with the Christ-event marks the first time in the history of God's dealings with Israel and the nations that celibacy is affirmed as a good state in and of itself. It is no longer necessary for the male to be yoked to the female in marriage, or the female to be yoked to the male in marriage, in order for both or either person to gesture towards the coming kingdom of God. Rather, insofar as all are clothed with Christ in baptism, one may rest assured of one's full endowment with the Spirit and full empowerment for ministry regardless of marital status (Gal 3:27–28).[11]

This eschatological understanding of celibacy is not just understood to involve the celibate person herself in a project of moral self-improvement, as if the goal were some kind of individualistic heroism.[12] Rather, the vocation of celibacy is understood in tandem with that of marriage as a way of *bearing witness* to the coming kingdom.[13] Neither celibacy nor marriage is intelligible by itself; both are viewed as interlocking and mutually reinforcing, as they together point toward the eschatological reign of God. Marriage in the NT comes to be understood as a sign of Christ's love for the church (Eph 5:22–33) and as a figure for the eschatological marriage supper of the Lamb in the book of Revelation (19:9; 21:1–2). Furthermore, the celibate vocation witnesses to what Oliver O'Donovan has called the "expansion," in the eschaton, of the fidelity of love that marriage signifies and makes possible.[14] Insofar as there will be no marrying nor being given in marriage in the resurrection (Matt 22:30), the celibate person's life now serves as a direct sign of the eschatological state. As Ephraim Radner has put it,

> Virgins are the firstfruits of the Church's destiny, in that their particular form of disciplined life acts as a figure of that holiness that all Christians in the Church will eventually embrace at the moment of their perfect readiness for their union

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[11] J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 33A; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 381. Compare also the insightful remarks along these lines, on which my comments depend, in Sarah Ruden, *Paul Among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His Own Times* (New York: Pantheon, 2010), chap. 4.

[12] Compare Joachim Gnilka, *Jesus of Nazareth: Message and History* (trans. Siegfriend S. Schatzmann; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997 [German orig., 1993]), 173.

[13] See esp. Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1991), chap. 10; idem, *After Christendom* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), chap. 5.

[14] O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 70.

> with Christ. … Sexual virginity is … a shadow of something fuller to come, a shadow, that is, of the purified life of redemptive reconciliation.[15]

At the same time, the ongoing Christian practice of marriage casts a backward eye to the creation narratives of Genesis 1–2, setting itself against all forms of incipient Marcionism or Manichaeism and "confirm[ing] and restor[ing] … the order of creation."[16] Inasmuch as marriage does this, it stands opposed to the ascetic impulse to devalue the body and question the goodness of creation.[17] And yet also, insofar as celibacy maintains its dignity, it underscores the gift-quality of marriage: "celibacy need[ed] to exist in the Church's social life in order for marriage to be a matter of freedom rather than compulsion."[18] Marriage, as Karl Barth recognized, became, in the NT's understanding, "a special vocation and gift, … a free decision and act on the part of the two human beings concerned."[19] The NT's endorsement of the celibate life "pointed beyond [the order of creation] to its eschatological transformation"[20] and thereby guaranteed both the dethroning of marriage as an obligation (one can be a sign of the eschatological life of God in Christ without marrying) and, at the same time, the celebration of marriage as a calling (one may receive marriage as a gift knowing that it is not the only form of life blessed by God).

In light of all this, evangelicals must commit themselves not merely to the toleration of celibacy but to its active promotion. Celibacy is not merely a temporary state to be lamented and endured as people make their inevitable passage toward marriage. Nor is celibacy to be understood as an inferior calling in which same-sex-attracted Christians fail to live out a truly healed or transformed life. On the contrary, celibate gay Christians precisely in and through their celibacy may be imitators of the life of Christ, signs of the coming kingdom, witnesses to the gracious calling of God for themselves and for their married friends and neighbors.

II. THE DISCIPLINE OF CELIBATE SEXUALITY

Turning our attention from the dignity of the celibate life, we must also ask about its nurture and discipline. How far is it practicable? What are the conditions that must be met for celibacy to be lived out in our churches with joy and hope? The Anglican theologian Sarah Coakley has noted the ways in which contemporary Western reflection on sexual desire is marked by contradictions. On the one hand, we hear clear calls for sexual abstinence for those who are unmarried. Any Chris-

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[15] See Ephraim Radner, *Hope Among the Fragments: The Broken Church and Its Engagement of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004), 131.

[16] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), 43.

[17] For Paul's qualification of Corinthian asceticism, see Alistair May, *The Body for the Lord: Sex and Identity in 1 Corinthians 5–7* (LNTS 278; London: T&T Clark, 2004).

[18] The World Meeting of Families, *Love is Our Mission: The Family Fully Alive* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2014), 65.

[19] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/4 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), 217.

[20] Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 70–71.

tian who is not wedded to a spouse is expected to abstain from sexual activity, in accord with biblical and classic Christian theology. On the other hand, we hear equally clear suspicion of the celibate state. Long-term singleness is viewed by many churches as inadvisable because of the unruly character of sexual desire. The result, as Coakley puts it, is "a most profound … 'cultural contradiction': celibacy is impossible, but celibacy must be embraced by some with unacceptable… [sexual] desires."[21]

If Coakley is at all on the right track with her diagnosis of our contemporary churches, then the situation is especially acute for those believers who experience sexual desire for members of their own sex. On the one hand, those of us who share that experience are asked to remain sexually abstinent. There is no Christian vocation of marriage to a spouse of the same sex. But on the other hand, we regularly encounter a dearth of theological and pastoral reflection when we seek to grapple with the practicalities and confusions of long-term sexual abstinence.

If gay and lesbian Christians are to be able to embrace long-term sexual abstinence, they need more than biblical theology. They need their fellow believers to help them face the pastoral and practical questions of the lived experience of celibacy in the midst of ongoing sexual desire. To return to Sarah Coakley's so-called "cultural contradiction," celibate gay and lesbian Christians are in need of churches who will not only continue to uphold the classic Christian teaching on marriage, celibacy, and homosexuality; they are equally in need of churches who will not denigrate the impossible ideal of celibacy but who will instead explore the intricate challenges and opportunities of that vocation with a view to the concrete specificities of daily experience.

What I have in mind is the kind of work that would enable gay and lesbian Christians not to try to erase or ignore their identities as sexual creatures but rather, as Oliver O'Donovan has put it, to "clothe … [their gay experience, which O'Donovan calls a "form of sensibility and feeling"] in an appropriate pattern of life for the service of God and discipleship of Christ."[22] Celibacy, in the Christian tradition, is not a form of life that turns a blind eye to the realities of sexual desire. It is not a way of seeking to escape one's created being. Indeed, as Coakley notes, in some ways "celibacy generally involve[s] a greater consciousness of sexual desire and its frustration than a life lived with regular sexual satisfaction."[23]

The reason for this is at least twofold. First, celibacy is, according to some of the most rigorous psychological research that has been undertaken in relation to this form of life, a pattern of life that is deepened over time and that yields its greatest benefits only after long practice. Contentment and loving service in and

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[21] Sarah Coakley, "Taming Desire: Celibacy, Sexuality and the Church" (May 20, 2011); online: http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2011/05/20/3222443.htm (italics removed). Cf. now Sarah Coakley, *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2015).

[22] Oliver O'Donovan, *Church in Crisis: The Gay Controversy and the Anglican Communion* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008), 117.

[23] Coakley, "Taming Desire."

through one's celibacy is not realized fully or flawlessly at first (e.g. by the Roman Catholic priests and vowed religious who make public pledges to do so) but is usually something "lived into," something that requires maturity. The former Catholic priest and psychotherapist A. W. Richard Sipe has spent the bulk of his career (approximately four decades) studying the practice of celibacy in Roman Catholic contexts, and he argues that genuine celibacy is indeed viable and healthy for those who attain it. But he believes it must be pursued.[24] A large number of vowed clergy do live lives of disciplined sexual abstinence, according to Sipe's major work *Celibacy in Crisis*, but what he refers to (unhelpfully)[25] as the "achievement" of celibacy—in which the major developmental crises have been weathered and the celibate state has been embraced and is, for all purposes, irreversible—is more rare, according to Sipe. He thinks that this mature state of "attained" celibacy is virtually always characterized by at least ten traits: first, by work (the productive use of time and energy);[26] second, by prayer (an active interior life lived in the presence of God); third, by community ("people to whom [celibates are] committed and people on whom they could rely");[27] fourth, by service (some form of self-giving that takes one beyond one's own sphere); fifth, by an awareness of one's physical needs and a willingness to fulfill one's lawful hungers with gentleness and self-care; sixth, by balance in the rhythms of one's lifestyle; seventh, by security in one's relational and communal commitments ("All celibate achievers had someone to whom they felt that they had confided the essence of themselves"); eighth, by order in one's daily and seasonal life; ninth, by learning and ongoing curiosity about others and the world one inhabits; and tenth and finally, by an appreciation of beauty. The one who undertakes this kind of celibate life must become intimately familiar with his or her characteristic patterns of desire, temptation, longing, and weakness.

But equally, celibates do not turn a blind eye to their sexuality because their sexuality is not reducible to their desire for genital intimacy. Sexuality, broadly conceived, is perhaps best understood as an affective capacity for relationality, encompassing the drive toward self-giving and reciprocal knowing in non-genital ways,

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[24] A. W. Richard Sipe, *Celibacy in Crisis: A Secret World Revisited* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2003), 301.

[25] Evangelical theologians will wish to place Sipe's helpful findings in a theological framework in which a person's celibate vocation is not understood as their own achievement. Rather, as Jonathan Linebaugh has remarked to me in personal correspondence (November 14, 2015), "[Theologically,] vocation is where we find ourselves placed by God—in the world, in our body, in our relationships. Our vocation is something we suffer, in the sense that we receive, undergo, and live in it. In this sense, celibacy isn't so much an achievement as a pathos, less a virtue than a life received and lived. None of that is to downplay the tensions and pains and need for disciplines in our vocations, but it does reframe those things by taking the moral burden off of progress towards joining the 2% [of clergy whom Sipe thinks 'achieve' celibacy]. You are celibate, given a body and place and people, and in those givens—in your life—you are called to live not in yourself but in Christ through faith and in your neighbor through love."

[26] I think here of those lines from Auden: "There should be monuments, there should be odes, / to the nameless heroes who took it first, // to the first flaker of flints / who forgot his dinner, // the first collector of sea-shells / to remain celibate" (W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems* [New York: Modern Library, 2007], 628).

[27] Sipe, *Celibacy in Crisis*, 307.

and celibacy is not the refusal of the creaturely task of being sexual but rather one particularly costly way of exploring that task. The Roman Catholic priest Louis J. Cameli has put it this way:

> A fundamental and essential distinction needs to be made between sexual (genital) activity and the living out of one's sexuality. They are not the same. [Although genital intimacy may or may not occur, living] out one's sexuality means an embodied and spiritual response to the innate dynamics of human sexuality to connect, to belong, and to give life. ... The specific challenge for homosexually inclined persons is to embrace their sexuality but not act out their sexuality in a genital way.[28]

This challenge is one that gay and lesbian believers must be helped to embrace and explore. It is not enough to limn the rationale for celibacy without engaging in the concretely particular challenges of its embodiments. Or, putting it positively, we must both affirm the dignity of the celibate life and begin to think more concretely and creatively about the specific forms of discipline and nurture and guidance that will enable gay and lesbian believers to flourish while embracing that vocation. And this leads me directly into my final point.

III. THE DIRECTION OF CELIBACY: SPIRITUAL KINSHIP AND FRIENDSHIP

Closely related to—indeed bound up with—the need for careful pastoral engagement with gay and lesbian celibates' sexualities is the need for our churches to encourage the connectedness and belonging of gay and lesbian believers in relationships of loving commitment.[29] In the wake of the United States Supreme Court's decision to ratify same-sex marriage, it is worth reflecting on the fact that this course of action was anything but inevitable. As O'Donovan has reminded his fellow Christians, "By no means everyone who speaks from [gay and lesbian] experience believes that marriage is the right model for conceiving their relationships. Some have seen it as the 'bourgeoisization' of gay experience."[30] That marriage did eventually come to be seen by a great swath of Americans as the right relationship for the solemnizing of same-sex partnerships speaks to the eclipse of other forms of belonging and kinship. Put another way, if same-sex friendship were more recognized, stable, and attainable in Western cultures, marriage would not have come to be seen as *the* essential relationship needed by gay and lesbian people to promote their flourishing.[31]

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[28] Louis J. Cameli, *Catholic Teaching on Homosexuality: New Paths to Understanding* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2012), 65.

[29] Cf. Paul Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of Love* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 102: "Celibacy has not in the least prevented certain great Christian figures from displaying communion of soul, from developing a mystical friendship in an activity together."

[30] O'Donovan, *Church in Crisis*, 111.

[31] Ironically, perhaps, I owe this line of thinking to Michel Foucault: "Homosexuality became a problem ... in the eighteenth century. ... I think the reason it appears as a problem, as a social issue, at this time is that friendship had disappeared. As long as friendship was something important, was socially

What has animated the same-sex marriage movement, aside from the desire for public honor and protection for the lives and loves of gay and lesbian people, is the desire for home. As multiple cultural critics have noted, this location of the ideal of home in marriage, specifically, is entangled with the increasingly marginal place of friendship on our various communities' horizons.[32] Kinship and belonging are experiences that we have located almost exclusively in marriage. As the theologian Christopher Roberts has said, "We cannot imagine existing in our culture without the haven of an erotic partnership because our capacity to belong together in more chaste ways is so limited."[33]

If our churches are going to encourage the practice of celibacy among gay and lesbian believers, we must also be prepared, then, to work at undermining the myth that true intimacy and genuine commitment are only available when one leaves the celibate state behind and turns to embrace marriage.

Christians are in part responsible for this state of affairs. Much of the history of Christian reflection on friendship, for instance, constitutes an effort to describe friendship as the least committed of relationships, or, in positive terms, as the freest, most preference-driven, and affection-dependent relationship that is possible for people to enjoy. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for instance, in an effort to elevate and praise the love of friendship, located it in the realm of play—the realm not of law and constraint but of grace and freedom. In one of his prison letters dated January 1944, he wrote to Eberhard Bethge that friendship, "unlike marriage and family relationships, ... doesn't enjoy any generally recognized rights but depends entirely on its own inherent quality."[34] The unfortunate result of this celebration of the freedom of friendship is that it may lead those who hunger for more committed, honored, and anchored relationships to think that such relationships are only possible for the married. Given our increasing isolation in late modernity and our fixation on the nuclear family, stressing the non-binding character of friendships may serve only to reinforce the atomization of celibate gay and lesbian believers and their lack of social integration in our churches and Christian communities.

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accepted ... it just didn't matter. Once friendship disappeared as a culturally accepted relation, the issue arose: 'What is going on between men?' ... The disappearance of friendship as a social relation and the declaration of homosexuality as a social/political/medical problem are the same process" (*Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* [Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984, vol. 1; New York: The New Press, 1998], 171).

[32] Cf. Eve Tushnet: "Gay couples long for marriage not solely—and often not primarily, as the rejection of civil unions suggests—for the practical benefits. ... [They long for the benefits] of home and honor, [which] are entirely a result of marriage's iconic status. ... These benefits lie close to the heart of the push for gay *marriage* rather than alternative kinship forms. (The other reason for 'gay marriage, not alternative kinship forms' is that modern folk, to our great detriment, stripped away the social and legal recognition and honor which once accrued to forms of kinship such as friendship and godparenthood. ... Because we can only understand kinship in terms of marriage and parenthood, we can only understand gay relationships as either marriages, or not really kin at all...)." "Keep the Aspidistra Flying"; online: http://eve-tushnet.blogspot.com/2010_09_01_archive.html#6065529697478253307.

[33] Roberts, *Creation and Covenant*, 227.

[34] For the full context, see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 8; trans. C. Gremmels, E. Bethge, R. Bethge, and I. Tödt; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 224, 247–48, 267.

Yet over against this strand of Christian reflection on friendship lies another interpretation of the love of friendship, one that views it as a form of kinship with its own kind of durability and obligation. Throughout much of Christian history, in both the Christian East and West, friendship was capable of solemnization, celebrated with public recognition, and strengthened by mutual promissory bonds. For instance, in the twentieth century philosopher-theologian Pavel Florensky's theological letters, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, he suggests that friendship be thought of as spiritual siblinghood. Fusing the voluntary love of friendship with the involuntary model of brother-to-brother love, Florensky maintained that Christian friendship is best understood as a permanent bond. "There are many temptations to turn away from a Friend, to remain alone or to start new relationships," he wrote. "But a person who has broken off one friendship will break off another, and a third, because he has replaced the way of ascesis"—the way of costly, self-sacrifical love—"with the desire for … comfort." But by pledging to be there for one particular friend, come what may, Florensky thought he could better learn the real meaning of Christian love. "The greatest … love is realizable," he concluded, "only in relation to *friends*, not in relation to all people, not 'in general.'"

Elsewhere Florensky compared this particular love of one friend for another to a molecular bond. Just as an organism depends on chemical connections, so too the church is not reducible to individuals but rather to pairs of friends. Believers are not called to exist as isolated units who love God in distinction from those around us. Instead, the love of God is manifested in our love for our friends, as the Johannine corpus in particular emphasizes (see John 15:13).[35]

Florensky's work is readily comparable to that of another exemplar of committed friendship in the Christian tradition, the twelfth-century monk Aelred, who served as the abbot of Rievaulx Abbey in the north of England from 1147 to 1167. It is probable that Aelred himself, prior to his entrance into the monastic life, was sexually involved with male partners.[36] Aelred writes in veiled terms about youthful dalliances and losing his virginity. Yet by the time he wrote his famous dialogue *Spiritual Friendship*, he had bound himself to the teachings of the church and foresworn sexual liaisons. The man who could describe a friend as one "to whom you so join and unite yourself that you mix soul with soul" and one whom you could embrace "in the kiss of unity, with the sweetness of the Holy Spirit flowing over you"

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[35] Pavel Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters* (trans. Boris Jakim; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 311, 318, 326.

[36] On Aelred as "gay," see John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 222–23. Compare also, however, the discussion in Brian Patrick McGuire, *Friendship and Community: The Monastic Experience, 350–1250* (1988; repr., Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 302–4, which critiques Boswell for greater confidence in his interpretation than Aelred's texts warrant. In the end, however, McGuire agrees that Aelred experienced same-sex attraction: "Insofar as Aelred indicated that he had to cope with a sexual desire for other men, Boswell's interpretation captures one aspect of the special quality of the earlier part of the twelfth century" (p. 303).

had apparently given up sex with persons of the same sex.[37] What Aelred called "spiritual friendship" was a form of same-sex intimacy that did not sanction its genital expression of erotic passion but rather—to borrow a later psychological vocabulary—sublimated or transmuted it.

Distinguishing between "carnal" or "worldly" friendship on the one hand and a higher, Christ-like friendship on the other, Aelred maintained that two or more monks could achieve a holy, purified intimacy that involved something like kinship ties or spousal promises. Echoing Cicero, he wrote, "Friendship is agreement in things human and divine, with good will and charity." Aelred went further than Cicero in attempting a Christological grounding for friendship, speaking of this form of love with specific allusion to Jesus's crucifixion: "Though challenged, though injured, though tossed into the flames, though nailed to a cross, *a friend loves always*." The reason monks could forge such deep bonds of friendship is that that way had been opened for them by Christ's own life and death.[38]

One of the features of Aelred's vision that has proved controversial over the years, even leading to the censoring of his book in twentieth-century monasteries, is his insistence that monks were not simply called to love all their fellow monks indiscriminately (although that was the baseline expectation). Aelred also made room for especially close bonds of mutual trust and affection between certain brothers and not others:

> Divine authority commands that many more be received to the clasp of charity than to the embrace of friendship. By the law of charity we are ordered to welcome into the bosom of love not only our friends but also our enemies. But we call friends only those to whom we have no qualm about entrusting our heart and all its contents, while these friends are bound to us in turn by the same inviolable law of loyalty and trustworthiness.[39]

Aelred explored and defended the possibility of uniquely intimate relationships that one monk might share with another, in which secrets were exchanged and depths of mutual trust were attained. Certainly Aelred also envisioned the gradual expansion of spiritual friendship, so that one's circle of trusted brothers might grow to encompass a wide community. But he maintained that that vision can only come to fruition if it begins small, with pairs or trios of committed brothers.[40]

To borrow Coakley's word again, it is a contradiction and a mistake—indeed, I would go further and call it a failure of hope and love, a failure of moral imagination—for evangelicals to encourage abstinence from same-sex sexual behavior while offering no "thick" account of the direction or destination celibate love may assume. As one same-sex-attracted believer has put it, "When Christians sell books

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[37] Aelred of Rievaulx, *De speculo caritatis*, as quoted in Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 225.

[38] Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship* (trans. L. C. Braceland; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 57, 59.

[39] Ibid., 61.

[40] Much of the preceding section is adapted from Wesley Hill, *Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2015).

and preach sermons encouraging non-married people to embrace their 'singleness' as a blessing, we are promoting the destructive effects of the sexual revolution. 'Singleness' as we conceive of it in our culture is not the will of God at all. It is representative of a deeply fragmented society. Singleness in America typically means a lack of kinship connectedness."[41] What those of us who are seeking to live celibate lives need is encouragement to pursue relationships of spiritual kinship in which our celibacy may become not an occasion for isolation, loneliness, and self-indulgence but rather a practice by which we may begin to learn, alongside our married friends, the virtues of self-sacrifice and promise-keeping.

Embracing such a vision will require evangelicals to recognize the same-sex attraction of some of their fellow Christians as the occasion to discover a particular calling. In recent years, various groups in the Evangelical Theological Society have debated the precise terms with which to describe the "fallenness" or "sinfulness" of same-sex desire, and it is not my point here to enter further into those debates.[42] Rather, I wish simply to underscore a point on which all parties should be able to agree, namely, that however the condition of same-sex sexual desire may be described and however it may be altered or sanctified at some future time, it constitutes the occasion for some to discover a positive call to love.

I say "occasion" rather than "means" in order to forestall the objection that a potentially sinful disposition could itself lead to holiness of conduct. It is not my purpose to argue that the seed of virtue inheres in same-sex sexual desire, or that such desire, apart from its social and cultural embodiment, somehow carries the potential for greater insight or ability. Rather, like many other fallen conditions that we rightly refuse to name as goods in and of themselves (e.g. deafness), same-sex attraction, while not among the goods of redemption, may become the locus at which or from which a particular habit or practice of love may emerge.[43] At the most basic level of personal testimony, I may register my own sense that it has been my experience of same-sex desire—and the hopes and fears that have emerged as I have wrestled with that desire—that have led me to read so much and think so carefully about how to preserve and strengthen my personal friendships. I doubt I would have given as much time and attention to the love of friendship if I had not grown up with the experience of same-sex attraction; I suspect I would have sought after marriage and appreciated, but perhaps not celebrated and arduously sought after, the love of friendship.

In one of his letters, C. S. Lewis suggests that rather than fixating on the psychological roots of same-sex attraction and seeking to pinpoint its origins, Chris-

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[41] Karen Keen, personal correspondence, August 25, 2013.

[42] See Denny Burk, "Is Homosexual Orientation Sinful?," *JETS* 58 (2015): 95–117.

[43] More theological reflection is needed at this point. If same-sex sexual attraction is intrinsically disordered, of what rightly ordered love is it therefore a distortion? We may rightly refuse to name same-sex attraction itself as neutral or as good while at the same time insisting that the good of which same-sex attraction is a falling short is a good that gay and lesbian people may be especially poised to recover and promote.

tians would do well to focus their attention more on what the person experiencing same-sex attraction is capable of offering to the church in which she finds herself:

> Our speculations on the cause of the abnormality are not what matters and we must be content with ignorance. The disciples were not told why (in terms of efficient cause) the man was born blind (Jn. IX 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.'

Lewis goes on later in the letter to describe "a certain pious [homosexual man who] believed that his necessity *could* be turned to spiritual gain: that there were certain kinds of sympathy and understanding, a certain social role which [only he could play]."[44] To ask that question—about what particular role a celibate gay or lesbian believer can play in the church—is to ask how the special temptation or weakness or fallenness that same-sex attraction is may come to be understood as the site or occasion or circumstance in which a vocation to love is discovered.

The apostle Paul may provide another model of this kind of discovery with his theological reflection on his "thorn in [or 'for'] the flesh" in 2 Cor 12:7–10. Paul is clear about the Satanic origin of the thorn (it is a "messenger of Satan to harass me" [2 Cor 12:7]). At the same time, his passive construction suggests that God has superintended this evil messenger and turned its evil to Paul's advantage, to accomplish his humbling and to encourage him to rely only on the power of Christ.[45] Thus, the grace of the Lord (i.e. Jesus Christ) is made perfect *in* Paul's weakness brought about by the thorn. The thorn is not itself a grace, but it becomes the occasion in or through which Paul encounters grace. Paul knows the Lord's grace not in the absence of, but in the midst of, his ongoing weakness.[46] Why should the same not prove true for today's gay and lesbian believers? We may decline to pinpoint some latent good in same-sex attraction itself, but we ought not to neglect to reflect on how the experience of same-sex desire may be the divinely appointed way in which celibate gay Christians discover the power of Christ made perfect in their lives.

IV. CONCLUSION

What will it take for gay and lesbian Christians to live lives, over the long term, that are marked by the graces of chastity, hope, and devoted service to others? If it is true that many same-sex-attracted Christians will find themselves living as single people with ongoing same-sex attraction, what kinds of support and care are they in need of for those lives to be practicable over the course of decades—and not

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[44] Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 147.

[45] Frank J. Matera, *II Corinthians: A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2003), 282.

[46] See Hill, *Washed and Waiting*, 72–73.

just practicable but joyful and marked by deep involvement in church life and devoted service to others?

I have suggested that the answer is at least threefold: their choice of celibacy must not be viewed as a kind of halfway house between full "healing" (understood as the reversal of their homosexual orientation) and a sub- or non-Christian life of self-indulgence. On the contrary, their celibacy must be dignified and heralded as their participation in a venerable vocation that has ancient scriptural, patristic, and indeed evangelical roots.[47] Likewise, the discipline entailed by their choice of celibacy must be explored with acute attention and care; they must not simply be told to be celibate without also being offered psychological, moral, and spiritual direction, based on knowledge of the truest findings of psychological research as well as the rich reflections of the ascetic and spiritual traditions of Christian history. And finally, they must be encouraged—we must be encouraged, for I number myself among them—to view our particular existence as the "washed and waiting," the same-sex-attracted and celibate, not simply as a life of deprivation but as a life that is directed toward community, friendship, hospitality: in short, directed toward love.

In these ways, please God, in thirty, forty, or fifty years, those gay and lesbian believers who are washed in the waters of baptism and waiting for the resurrection of the dead will be those who are washed and still waiting, still persevering in the hope of eternal life.[48]

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[47] See further Colón and Field, *Singled Out*.

[48] I am grateful to Michael Allen, James Ernest, Jonathan Linebaugh, Matthew Loftus, and Daniel Treier for comments on an earlier version of this paper.

Keep that Same Energy: African Methodists and the Whole Black Testimony

Esau McCaulley

The United Methodist Church's recent decision to uphold the theology of marriage as the union of one man and one woman has been making the news again. It seems that some who voted may have been ineligible to do so, although there weren't enough ineligible votes to change the outcome.

I do not wish to enter into a debate about the nature of marriage or improper voters but want to reflect on the role of black traditionalists in the discussion. Most people acknowledge that votes from delegates from the booming church in Africa and other parts of the majority world proved decisive. The UMC's theology of marriage remains unchanged because a majority of black and brown members do not believe that a revision of the church's teaching is warranted.

African Methodists

As someone on the conservative side of a similar conservation, which took place about 15 years ago in the Anglican communion, this division between largely white progressive voices in North America and conservative voices in Africa feels familiar. The major difference is that the Methodists eventually allowed African voices to have a full hearing while my own communion has managed, much to our shame, to stifle and distort the voices of black and brown Anglicans. This is not to say that African Anglicans or African Methodists are a monolith. But on the whole, they are

more traditional than many of their North American brothers and sisters.

One quote, representing these African Methodists, has been making its way around the internet. It came from Dr. Jerry P. Kulah, Dean of Gbarnga School of Theology in Liberia. He said:

Friends, please hear me, we Africans are not afraid of our sisters and brothers who identify as lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgendered, questioning, or queer. We love them and we hope the best for them. But we know of no compelling arguments for forsaking our church's understanding of Scripture and the teachings of the church universal.

And then please hear me when I say as graciously as I can: we Africans are not children in need of western enlightenment when it comes to the church's sexual ethics. We do not need to hear a progressive U.S. bishop lecture us about our need to "grow up."

Conservative white Christians have shared this quote to highlight the hypocrisy of white liberal calls for inclusion. Conservatives rightly point out that it is one thing to applaud inclusion when black voices agree with you, but it is quite another thing to listen and learn from people of color when they diverge from the progressive consensus.

Some white conservatives claim that white liberals are dismissing black voices in a way that smacks of theological colonialism, and there is nothing more enraging to a post-colonialist than to be called that which they now despise.

White progressives have responded to accusations of hypocrisy by claiming that African theological traditionalism is nothing more than a manifestation of white fundamentalism. Progressives claim that African theological reflection has been unduly influenced by American evangelical biblical

interpretation. Furthermore, white progressives assert that white conservative evocation of black voices is self-serving.

Social Activism + Orthodox Theology

There may be some truth to the progressive critique of white conservatives' self-serving use of black voices. Nonetheless, it is startling to witness white progressives' unwavering confidence that their own theologically liberal, Western European/North American consensus is so clearly correct that to oppose it is to oppose all that is true and good. It is also shocking to see white progressives insinuate that black conservative beliefs can't actually originate from black spaces but must be the result of white influence. Someone can disagree with black traditionalists, and not be a colonizer, but if someone criticizes the opposition like a colonizer, they may be a colonizer.

Historically, the black theological tradition, at least in its ecclesial manifestation, has combined a passion for social activism with orthodox theology. They have combined theological orthodoxy (including traditional teachings on marriage and sex) with a commitment to fight for a place to live and breathe and dream in a country that denied them basic freedoms. I was formed by this dual commitment to orthodoxy and orthopraxy. This combination, however, means that I and others often feel out of place in the context of our present controversies where biblical fidelity, as the Church has understood it, is placed in competition with justice.

When Christians of color speak about justice in the context of police violence, poverty, immigration, and racism, we are lauded by progressive white Christians. When we advocate for what they consider to be conservative ideas (traditional marriage, the sanctity of life, the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures), we encounter the same disdain that African Methodists experienced.

On the other hand, some white conservatives instrumentalize Christians of color when we speak about marriage, yet ignore us when we call for a pursuit of an expansive vision of justice, namely the definition found in the Bible. Some white conservatives only value black voices when we are willing to repeat talking points that do not originate in our communities.

Keep That Same Energy

The North American church needs to listen to the whole of the Black Church's witness, not simply the parts that fit with their agenda. The same Scriptures and orthodoxy that compel us to denounce white supremacy also compel us to speak about the sanctity of those black and brown babies in the womb. These same Scriptures lead us to plead for a compassionate immigration policy and to also argue that women are image bearers who deserve the freedom to pursue their varied callings, free of the sting of misogyny.

Be consistent about the passion you have for justice when we speak about the real damage that the president is doing to people of color. We also want our white progressive friends to know that there is more to being a Christian than being woke. We want to say that our best reading of the Scriptures, alongside the catechesis of the human body itself, leads us to affirm traditional marriage. This is not about hate, homophobia, or a denial of the essential worth of all human beings. It is about an earnest desire to be obedient to the faith as we understand it.

Christians of color are not weapons in a war between white conservative and white liberal Christians. Theologians of color are just that — theologians who can reason and learn for themselves. Listening to black voices involves learning that black theology, in its ecclesial form, is multifaceted. It defies caricature and challenges the too-easy narratives of both the Right and the

Left.

Where can these voices be found? They are right across the street in the pulpits of your city. These voices are in the prayers of black Sunday school teachers, church mothers, and deacons. They are black Baptists, Presbyterians, Catholics, Methodists, and Anglicans. They are those who left mainline churches to form their own communions and also those that remained.

These voices are found in the hymns, spirituals, and gospel songs that retain their power to inspire. These voices are found in the defiant, but hopeful words of Mother Pollard who articulated the spirit of the Montgomery bus boycott when she said, "My feets is tired, but my soul is rested." To listen to these voices means to take them seriously as sources of theological insight. We too have the Spirit.

Therefore, it will not do for white progressives to dismiss the arguments and concerns of black traditionalists with accusations of being on the "wrong side of history." No one person or party owns the copyrights to our stories.

Progressives must not simply evoke white supremacists' sinful use of the Bible to justify black enslavement and use that historic injustice to argue for every change in the church's teachings. *It is a colonization of our history*. The early black American Christians did not argue that the Bible is wrong and that to reject it equaled freedom. Black Christians argued that the slave masters had poor exegesis. And the work of rejecting poor exegesis continues.

Until the Lord returns, we will do our best to faithfully read and interpret the Scriptures and present those meanings to the broader church for debate and discussion. We follow in the footsteps of brother Paul who said, "We believed and therefore we spoke (2 Cor, 4:13)."

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Homosexuality & The Church

(Featured in our collection of stories about Catholicism & Same-Sex Marriage)

One of the frightening aspects of loving somebody is the way that love can seem to offer unique access not only to pleasure but to truth. Love of another person—not only romantic love, but familial love and deep friendship as well—promises or threatens to reshape us completely. It can become the lens through which we see the world.

When I came out as a lesbian, provoked in part by a puppyish crush, I felt as though I had found the key that unlocked the secrets of the world. The only experience that has ever given me a greater rush of self-understanding was my conversion to Catholicism. The two experiences felt weirdly similar: both were frightening and illuminating, separating me to a certain extent from friends and family, yet both were prompted by love.

Perhaps this similarity between love of another person and love of God is one reason that Scripture makes love between humans one of its central metaphors for the love story of God and humankind—while also asserting the primacy of the divine love story over, and sometimes against, the human ones. Scripture gives us "His banner over me was love" (Song of Songs 2:4), but also "If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). We should seek to reconcile love of God and love of others whenever they appear to conflict. But we can't simply assume that such a conflict never exists—or that, if a conflict seems to arise, God couldn't possibly be asking us to sacrifice a human relationship.

Luke Timothy Johnson's essay touches on some of the deepest questions for a Christian: How do I understand and express my love for others? How should I let love reshape me? How should I read Scripture, especially in light of this love? For the Catholic, Johnson addresses an additional question: How should I read Scripture by the light of the church? And for an American in 2007, he adds a question that has become unavoidable: How can a Christian understand homosexuality?

Johnson's conclusions are quite different from my own (and don't reflect my experience). But his questions are the right ones, and his approach is far more fruitful than the ways in which our culture most often handles homosexuality.

Homosexuality has become a cultural battleground for reasons that have very little to do with Catholic morality or scriptural prohibitions. So many people, including many Catholics, meet the idea that gay couples are doing something wrong with blank incomprehension for a lot of reasons. Some are obvious: changing views of sex (including the wishful-thinking belief that birth control has separated sex from reproduction—spend an evening at a crisis pregnancy center and you'll quickly figure out how much the pill didn't change); the growing tendency to think of the body more as an instrument, to be used by the mind, than as a sign with its own integrity.

But others are less obvious and perhaps more emotionally powerful. Several recent studies have found that Americans are having a harder time making and keeping close personal relationships. We move halfway across the country, we replace communal gathering places like churches with more solitary "third places" like coffee shops, we have an intense longing for familial connection but terrible difficulty keeping our families together. And so we're ready to cheer on any kind of personal connection at all, any love that lasts, since we see it much more rarely than we used to.

Anxieties about homosexuality are often driven by anxieties about masculinity. A lot of men, whether consciously or subconsciously, view lesbians as women outside male control, and gay men as traitors and predators, denying their own masculinity and threatening the masculinity of other men. This attitude may be nonsense (how is your masculinity threatened because another guy thinks you're attractive?), but it's real. So any discussion of homosexuality taps into deep-seated fears about what it means to be a man, and whether differences between men and women are created by the culture to keep women subordinate. We're willing to do all kinds of terrible things in order to attain or keep a valued social role, a narrative that makes us feel worthy. For many men, achieving manhood is a major part of their identity. Acceptance of homosexuality—a worldview in which men and women are interchangeable in their sexual and familial roles—can feel deeply threatening. And men whose social roles and sense of their own masculine identity are threatened do sometimes—this is shocking, I know—become irrational and violent.

The often vicious and violent anxiety about masculinity is one reason that the ways in which homosexuality is stigmatized in our culture look nothing like the ways we treat many other things Scripture calls vices. Kids on the playground taunt each other for being gay, even disparaging other kids' backpacks or pencil cases as "so gay." People get beaten up or harassed on the street for their real or perceived homosexuality. Parents reject their children for coming out—I suspect most gay people know at least a few friends who were rejected in the most hurtful and vicious ways. (If we care about family breakup, we need to care about families broken by the actions of homophobic parents, as well as those broken by divorce.) This isn't how we treat the acts we really consider sinful. It's how we treat scapegoats.

Catholics who find it difficult, even impossible, to believe the traditional Catholic story of sexual morality are often reacting to this cultural

landscape. They see devoted couples on one side, violent insecurity and parental rejection on the other. And they see Catholic prohibitions against homosexual acts as providing an excuse for the violent and the cruel.

So it's tempting to conclude that prohibitions against homosexuality are culture-bound, no more universally binding than the requirement that women cover their heads in church. It's true that culture conditions how we read Scripture, and that as Christians we need to be open to the countercultural implications of the gospel. But this fact argues far more strongly against Johnson's position than against the church's. If we seek to overcome any aspects of our culture that conflict with the gospel, I'm not sure why we would expect the gay liberation movement-slightly over a hundred years old, and largely Western in character-to be less culture-bound, and therefore a better guide to the countercultural aspects of the gospel, than the Catholic Church. The church is bigger and older than you, me, or the very concept of the homosexual person. (The view that sexual orientation is intrinsic and constitutive of a person's deepest identity comes from a school of psychology that owes very little to the gospel, and a great deal to anti-Christian forms of philosophical materialism.)

Experience is itself a kind of text, and texts need interpreters. How often have we thought that we understood our experiences, only to realize later that we had only the barest understanding of our own motives and impulses? We all know how flexible memory can be, how easy it is to give an overly gentle account of our own motivations, how hard it is to step outside our lifelong cultural training and see with the eyes of another time or place. To my mind, Johnson's approach places far too much trust in personal experience. He views our experience as both more transparent and less fallible than it is. To take personal experience as our best and sturdiest guide seems like a good way to replicate all of our personal preferences and cultural blind spots. Scripture is weird and tangly and anything but obvious

—but at least it wasn't written by someone who shared all our desires, preferences, and cultural background. At least it wasn't written by us. And so it's necessary to turn at least as much skepticism on "the voice of experience" as Johnson turns on the voice of Scripture. It's necessary to look at least as hard for alternative understandings of our experience as for alternative understandings of Scripture.

And in fact there are theologians who, allowing themselves to be surprised and guided by Scripture and church teaching, have provided accounts of sexuality that resonate with my own experience in a lot of ways. The only theological "school" or approach that has helped me understand at least parts of the church teaching on homosexuality is the theology of the body. This approach, or my understanding of it, is imperfect; but it's much more convincing to me than the often mechanistic natural-law approaches, which tend to assume cultural consensus on teleology.

As I understand it, the theology of the body takes Jesus' words on Jewish divorce laws as its starting point: "From the beginning it was not so" (Matthew 19:8). In this approach, we look to Genesis, to the creation narratives, to discover who we truly are and how we could most perfectly relate to one another. Although marriage is the primary focus of the theology of the body, sexual difference is a recurring theme. And here we discover that la différence is at the heart of human nature. Before we relate to one another as parent and child, worker and boss, artist and audience, soldier and comrade, or any other relationship, we are man and woman. Before we have any other identity (excepting, of course, our most central identity as children of God), we have sexual identity.

I believe that. Through history and in almost all great art, he and she are distinct, and their difference is fundamental in a way that class differences, ethnic differences, maybe even differences of belief are not. And yet every

attempt to codify sexual difference fails. People (mostly men) keep making these lists to explain what distinguishes men and women: Women are more practical, or more fickle, or more romantic or less; they're more nurturing or more petty or more gentle, more selfless or more selfish. These lists aren't just false, they're also boring. They take the vivid reality of sexual difference and flatten it out, drain the color from it. What good is an understanding of womanhood that would leave out Shakespeare's Cleopatra, or Molly Bloom?

The theology of the body, almost alone among theories of la différence, avoids the listmaking trap. Here, man is defined by his longing for woman, woman by her longing for man; this is the "nuptial meaning of the body." The male becomes a man and the female a woman in their yearning for each other. Love of the other both creates and reconciles the sexes.

There are some obvious attractions of this theology. It's very beautiful. It reconciles two seemingly irreconcilable facts (the enduring importance of sexual difference, and the impossibility of defining that difference through lists of qualities). It focuses on the creation of identity through love of another, whose otherness remains even as the two become "one flesh." This supports the metaphorical use of human love in Scripture, and even deepens our understanding of that metaphor.

But there are equally obvious problems with applying this Genesis model to homosexuality. I've never found that lesbian women were less womanly, or gay men less manly. Either I'm misunderstanding the implications of the theology of the body, or I'm misunderstanding my own experience. (Or both, of course!) Moreover, showing that homosexual relationships are imperfect, that they do not echo our life in Eden as well as heterosexual relationships can, might not be the same as showing that gay sex is always and everywhere wrong. In his book Gay Marriage: Why It Is Good for Gays, Good for Straights, and Good for America, the gay-rights advocate

Jonathan Rauch, an atheist, calls homosexuality "a (mild) disability," but not an inclination to immorality. And the "theology of the body" approach doesn't give any guidance on the questions currently most pressing to me: How can I express my love of women in ways consonant with church teaching; and how can I deepen my love of Christ through all the other loves in my life, including romantic love?

So I'm not completely satisfied, yet, with the explanations I've seen for church teaching. I do think I'm closer to understanding it now than I was when I was confirmed. I see more of the beauty in the teaching now, and I think I'm at the point of beginning actual theological investigation of the question, rather than just staring at the church in utter confusion. Both the theologians and I have a lot of work to do here. You might even say that Johnson and I agree that what the church has done so far on this issue isn't enough—we just disagree on which approaches might bear fruit in the future.

The coming-out story is a quintessentially American story. It is self-discovery in opposition to societal regulation. It is personal liberation—as American as "lighting out for the territory." There are ways to tell the Christian story so that it corresponds very well to this story of self-discovery and liberation: through Christ we are freed from sin and come to know ourselves; in Nietzsche's phrase, we "become what we are." But there are other ways of talking about Christian life-ways that focus on sacrifice, martyrdom, dying in Christ to live with him—which are perhaps less quintessentially American, and for that reason all the more necessary for us. There's a reason all Catholic churches have a crucifix, an image of the tortured God.

Johnson, like many writers who oppose the church's prohibition against all homosexual acts, points to the real virtues exhibited by so many gay

couples: loyalty, caretaking, and compassion. Anyone who supports church teaching must still acknowledge that these virtues are real; that deep, often sacrificial love works through these couples like gold threads in cloth. The question is whether that is enough. How could it not be? How could Christ require more?

"And behold, one came up to him, saying, 'Teacher, what good deed must I do, to have eternal life?' And he said to him, 'Why do you ask me about what is good? One there is who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments.' ...The young man said to him, 'All these I have observed; what do I still lack?' Jesus said to him, 'If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.' When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions." (Matthew 19:16-22)

The sacrifices you want to make aren't always the only sacrifices God wants.

And so the central problem emerges: Whom do we follow? How do we follow love? Can a human beloved have the same ability to overturn us completely—to read and interpret and reshape us—that Jesus himself has? Can love of another person do the same work as the love of God?

Almost all the time, love of God will deepen and strengthen our love of others in obvious ways, rather than conflicting with that love or posing a dilemma. And so we are tempted to believe that our love of God and our love of others won't ever conflict. But there will be times when it does seem like God is asking us to choose. At the very least, God may require us to radically reshape our understanding of what love of another person should look like. God may ask you not to stop loving your partner but to express that love without sex.

The analogy between God's love for us and our love for one another is real but partial, and needs to be understood in light of the entire teaching of the church. The church does not teach that whatever anyone does out of a deep conviction and a desire to express love is always intrinsically good. We can sincerely seek to do good and yet actually act wrongly; this happens all the time. Even the saints get stuff wrong, as do all kinds of loving, sincere people. It might even be said that the reason we have church teaching in the first place is that loving, sincere people do their best and still sometimes get things very wrong.

Johnson begins by saying that his position "stand[s] in tension with Scripture." But he then seems to use human beloveds as a kind of walking Scripture in themselves, able to contradict and correct the merely paper canon. So he writes:

"I think it important [for the integrity of our position] to state clearly that we do, in fact, reject the straightforward commands of Scripture, and appeal instead to another authority when we declare that same-sex unions can be holy and good. And what exactly is that authority? We appeal explicitly to the weight of our own experience and the experience thousands of others have witnessed to, which tells us that to claim our own sexual orientation is in fact to accept the way in which God has created us."

I'm not convinced this is how human love stories relate to the divine love story. Loving one another can be an echo of the love we receive from God; it can be the child of that love; it can be preparation for our own awestruck love of God. (I would argue that my erotic and romantic love of women has been all three of those things, at different times.) But our human experience, including our erotic experience, cannot be a replacement for the divine revelation preserved by the church. We must be careful not to let it become a counternarrative or a counter-Scripture.

So we're left back where we started: with the seemingly irresolvable conflict between the church's teaching on the one hand, and the difficulty of believing that teaching for many contemporary Catholics.

I am unimpressed with the attempts to resolve the conflict by negating the teaching. And so I have to seek ways to make that teaching more intelligible. I hope this essay has suggested some ways already. Strengthen your families (and your friendships). Accept your children, loving and welcoming them, even, and perhaps especially, when you can't approve of all of their beliefs or choices. (Welcome your children's friends, as well, especially those who have been rejected or hurt by their own parents.) Don't set homosexuality apart, a specially and un-Scripturally stigmatized and identity-shaping category. Accept the sacrifices of Catholic life; don't try to wriggle out of them when they hurt you, as they inevitably will. Don't try to ignore them when they hurt someone you love; offer the real compassion of friendship, helping your loved one carry the cross, as Simon of Cyrene did for our Lord, not the false compassion of "whatever you think best, honey."

I was incredibly lucky. I did not have to overcome familial rejection when I came out. I didn't face violence or even much teasing. And, of course, this charmed life made it easier for me to believe that Catholic teaching was not based in hatred. I was equally lucky that the friends whose influence ultimately helped me accept the grace of conversion didn't focus on my sexual orientation. They knew I was gay, and that I was pretty vocal about it. They tried, when I asked, to explain church teaching on homosexuality, but did it very poorly. I'm glad that they instead wanted to talk with me about the Crucifixion as the reconciliation of justice and mercy, or Creation as an explanation of the goodness and intrinsic, poetic meaning of the physical world. There are obviously things that could have been done or said better. I remember one very sweet, good-hearted priest who tried to help me out (again, because I asked him to) by comparing lesbian sex to trying to use a

doorknob wrapped in barbed wire. I did my best to cover my bewilderment with politeness.

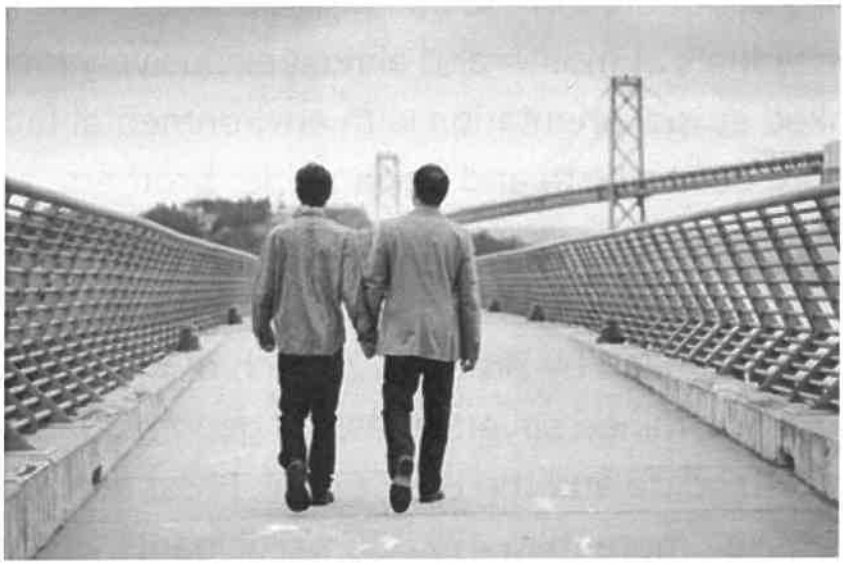
When I was baptized and confirmed, pledging, "I believe all that the Catholic Church believes and teaches," I did it basically as a leap of faith. I knew why I needed to be Catholic; I knew that as a Catholic I'd have to follow this stuff, faith seeking understanding and all that; I trusted that eventually I would understand the reasons behind the teaching a little better. And I do. Even so, I waver on how much I think I understand the teaching from day to day.

But what has constantly surprised me about the Catholic Church is just how much there is for me here. There is a rich theology of friendship, helping me to express my love of women both sacrificially and chastely. There's honor for both celibacy and married life, and resources for living fruitfully in either of these states. We have Oscar Wilde's fairy tales, we have saints who are possibly even crazier than I am, we have the Anima Christi and Thomas à Kempis's rewriting of the Song of Songs as a hymn to the crucified Christ. I feel as if every week or so I discover yet another hidden treasure of the church that speaks to me in exactly the way I need in order to deal specifically with my struggles, resentments, longings, and strengths as a woman and a lesbian. We can make the church's teaching believable by becoming more Catholic—which is, not coincidentally, what we should be doing anyway.

Massive Study Finds No Single Genetic Cause of Same-Sex Sexual Behavior

Analysis of half a million people suggests genetics may have a limited contribution to sexual orientation

Sara Reardon August 29, 2019



Credit: Getty Images

Few aspects of human biology are as complex—or politically fraught—as sexual orientation. A clear genetic link would suggest that gay people are "born this way," as opposed to having made a lifestyle choice. Yet some fear that such a finding could be misused "cure" homosexuality, and most research teams have shied away from tackling the topic.

Now, a new study claims to dispel the notion that a single gene or handful of genes make a person prone to same-sex behavior. The analysis, which examined the genomes of nearly half a million men and women, found that

although genetics are certainly involved in who people choose to have sex with, there are no specific genetic predictors. Yet some researchers question whether the analysis, which looked at genes associated with sexual activity rather than attraction, can draw any real conclusions about sexual orientation.

"The message should remain the same that this is a complex behavior that genetics definitely plays a part in," said study co-author Fah Sathirapongsasuti, a computational biologist at genetic testing company 23andMe in Mountain View, Calif., during a press conference. The handful of genetic studies conducted in the past few decades have looked at only a few hundred individuals at most—and almost exclusively men. Other studies have linked sexual orientation with environmental factors such as hormone exposure before birth and having older brothers.

In the new study, a team led by Brendan Zietsch of the University of Queensland, Australia, mined several massive genome data banks, including that of 23andMe and the UK Biobank (23andMe did not fund the research). They asked more than 477,000 participants whether they had ever had sex with someone of the same sex, and also questions about sexual fantasies and the degree to which they identified as gay or straight.

The researchers found five single points in the genome that seemed to be common among people who had had at least one same-sex experience. Two of these genetic markers sit close to genes linked to sex hormones and to smell—both factors that may play a role in sexual attraction. But taken together, these five markers explained less than 1 percent of the differences in sexual activity among people in the study. When the researchers looked at the overall genetic similarity of individuals who had had a same-sex experience, genetics seemed to account for between 8 and 25 percent of

the behavior. The rest was presumably a result of environmental or other biological influences. The findings were published Thursday in *Science*.

Despite the associations, the authors say that the genetic similarities still cannot show whether a given individual is gay. "It's the end of the 'gay gene,'" says Eric Vilain, a geneticist at Children's National Health System in Washington, D.C., who was not involved in the study.

The research has limitations: almost all of the participants were from the U.S. or Europe, and the individuals also tended to be older—51 years old on average in the 23andMe sample and at least 40 in the UK Biobank sample.

Still, researchers welcome the data. "A lot of people want to understand the biology of homosexuality, and science has lagged behind that human interest," says William Rice, an evolutionary geneticist at the University of California, Santa Barbara, who also was not involved in the work. "It's been a taboo topic, and now that we're getting information I think it's going to blossom."

The study will not be the last word on the vexing question of what causes homosexuality, however. In 1993 geneticist Dean Hamer of the U.S. National Cancer Institute and his colleagues published a paper suggesting that an area on the X chromosome called Xq28 could contain a "gay gene." But other studies, including the new paper, found no such link, and Sathirapongsasuti says that the new study is the final nail in the coffin for Xq28 as a cause of same-sex attraction.

But Hamer, now retired, disagrees. His study, which analysed the genomes of 40 pairs of gay brothers, looked exclusively at people who identified as homosexual. He sees the new paper as an analysis of risky behavior or

openness to experience, noting that participants who engaged in at least one same-sex experience were also more likely to report having smoked marijuana and having more sexual partners overall. Hamer says that the findings do not reveal any biological pathways for sexual orientation. "I'm glad they did it and did a big study, but it doesn't point us where to look."

Rice and Vilain agree that the conclusion is unclear. A more detailed questionnaire that looks at more aspects of sexuality and environmental influences would allow the researchers to better pinpoint the roots of attraction.

The authors say that they did see links between sexual orientation and sexual activity, but concede that the genetic links do not predict orientation. "I think it's true we're capturing part of that risk-taking behavior," Sathirapongsasuti says, but the genetic links still suggested that same-sex behavior is related to attraction.

Nevertheless, Hamer and others praise the new contribution to a field that suffers from a dearth of good studies. "I hope it will be the first of many to come."

A thread by Tish Harrison Warren

This is completely fascinating. And oooh boy is it a lot to think about.Some initial thoughts:1. The take away is that sexuality & sexual orientation is massively complex. This seems self-evident but is not often the way it's popularly talked about.

KAYANA SZYMCZAK FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Many Genes Influence Same-Sex Sexuality, Not a Single 'Gay Gene'

By Pam Belluck August 29, 2019

The largest study of same-sex sexual behavior finds the genetics are complicated, and social and environmental factors are also key.

A Christian anthropology & sexual ethic supports this idea. All of our sexualities & orientations (whether gay, straight, asexual, or somewhere in between) are as myriad and diverse as our individual stories. So complex that only God fully understands them or how we got here. This also means that all of us--gay and straight--are affected by God's image and glory *in our sexuality.* And that all of us--gay and straight--are affected by the Fall in our sexuality. When gay people claim their sexuality/sexual expression isn't fallen, that's not a Christian claim. And when straight people-often by virtue of being

straight-claim their sexuality/sexual expression isn't fallen, that isn't a Christian claim. All sexuality bears marks of grace & marks of sin. We have to allow for this deep complexity in our conversation as a church. We all begin as image bearers and we all are wrecked and cracked to the core. No one gets to claim utter sexual wholeness. We start in need of grace. Okay, so all that said (preachers gone preach...). I don't love the language of genetics plays a role in "whether someone has same-sex sex." It seems like genetic determinism. Can totally buy that it plays a role in attraction/orientation/desires. But it seems genetics doesn't determine who we sleep with. Any more than genetics determines if I eat the cake in my fridge (though I have diabetes & it would harm me...and I'm genetically predisposed to like sweets). If I could wave a wand and permanently kill the "choice" v. "genes" debate, I would. No sane person thinks being gay is something someone wholesale wakes up and chooses one day. But that is never the point --or the view--of Christians understanding of sexuality, ethics, or sin

All that to say, the main point of this article is that ssa is not mainly or mostly genetically. It's mostly determined by environmental factors. But what I . now what to know is: what factors? Early sexual experiences, family, community, societal norms, what? I'd love to know

Lastly, it's fascinating to me that this is an article about science but 90% is a debate about ethics & ideology. All for science but it's obvious science is never merely objective. Science is full of presuppositions, faith, & metaphysics. Also sorry about the typos...I wrote this too quickly for my own good.

The Middle of Sexual Identity

By Eve Tushnet • November 28, 2012, 6:14 PM

A little while ago I mentioned that I finished Jenell Williams Paris's recent *The End of Sexual Identity: Why Sex Is Too Important to Define Who We Are*. That post was about a totally different topic, so here is my actual review.

Paris teaches anthropology at Messiah College in PA, and her book is pitched at an audience, I think, roughly similar to her students: young, well-meaning American evangelicals raised within the American evangelical hothouse. A good portion of her book is dedicated to showing that our culture's division of humanity into gay and straight isn't some kind of Aristotelian discernment of natural kinds, but rather a culturally-contingent process with a troubled history. She shows that there are many alternative ways of explaining and categorizing human sexual desire.

This approach is necessary, given that a lot of our current debates about homosexuality simply assume that Western sexologists unlocked the true, hidden meaning which same-sex desire has *really* always had. I can't tell you how often I've read sentences which start with things like, "In medieval Europe, gay people...." Unless your book is time-travel science fiction, I'm gonna stop you right there. This "history is just like us, only smaller" approach cramps our imaginations. Paris is attempting to liberate those imaginations.

And I know many people who have found her book liberating. People who find contemporary sexual identity categories and questions exhausting and rigid may find a lot to relate to here. That includes people sick of being told that they're "really gay" and just need to find a great man and settle down,

or they're "not really gay" because they're celibate for religious reasons; or people who are tired of hearing the bizarre claim that religion is a choice, so it can be changed, but sexual orientation is not (when neither one is really a "choice" in the most important senses).

There are good points in the book about the need for evangelicals to recover not only a theology of celibacy but a community in which celibate *people* are embraced and welcomed. Ditto Paris's points about the idolatry of marriage. Her chapters on marriage and celibacy are too short to be more than suggestive, but they are worth reading for anyone embedded in the culture from which she's speaking.

But there are some major problems with Paris's slim, frustrating book.

Paris doesn't account for *why* the Western gay/straight division has proven so attractive. Specifically, she glosses over the way that division has been embraced by people from very, very non-Western cultures. She has to argue that gay activists in (to take a non-random example) Uganda are mere microphones of the West, rather than people who have found something of their own experiences and struggles reflected in the admittedly insufficient Western framework.

In general Paris just does not seem to understand why and how *gay people* use the sexual identity framework. She simply dismisses the one actual gay person she quotes describing his reasons for identifying that way. There's no sense, in her book, of how discovering gay culture and history can mean discovering that one's own life and emotions aren't entirely unprecedented; that there's a community and an imaginable future for you; that there's a language, however inadequate!, for some of the things which separate you from those around you and even from your own parents.

This book has, honestly, the problems you might expect from a book by a

straight, married woman who chooses not to self-identify as "heterosexual." The book quotes *literally no* named, rather than pseudonymous, self-identified gay or same-sex attracted people discussing their identities or their faith. It's just weird that their voices are so thoroughly missing. Paris offers no sense of what "getting beyond" the sexual identity framework looks like in practice. If I wanted to start living my life in accordance with Paris's insights, I have no idea what exactly I would change–other than that I would stop calling myself gay.

I agree with Paris that our contemporary "gay vs. straight" framework had a beginning, and it will have an end. In 100 years, even if the Messiah tarries, I doubt we will still be considering ourselves gay and straight. But I think the best way to move toward a better future is to focus on a) vocations (an area where Paris's book does some good work), and b) what it looks like to express or sacrifice our *eros* in accordance with our faith. History is a terrific resource here, especially when it's done with a sense of how different the past is and a humble willingness to take dead people on their own terms–I will once again recommend Alan Bray's beautiful *The Friend*, a truly imagination-expanding work.

Trying to end the sexual identity framework by direct attack, as Paris does, risks navel-gazing special snowflakery (because what it focuses on is *still* how you "identify") and an inability to notice one's own blind spots created by privilege.

My previous post on "identifying as gay" here for those who can't get enough of that wonderful Duff. And a significantly more positive review of Paris's book, by the awesome Wesley Hill, is here.

I Couldn't Live the Lie of My Sexuality

August 30, 2019

A girl in a boy's body, that's me, I thought to myself as a sensitive, tenderhearted, 5-year-old boy.

Somehow I just knew it. And I also knew there was something wrong with that, so I'd just have to keep it to myself. After playing dress-up with my six sisters, I'd get to wear their dresses when no one was looking. I'd be the princess in secret. Relief. Other boys had dreams of playing in the World Series; I dreamt of becoming a fabulous woman with a handsome boyfriend.

I definitely couldn't tell my father, one of those ex-Army, too-tough guys. He was an alcoholic, and there was always the threat of violence. He'd never understand—indeed, he didn't when I told him at 14 that I might be gay. He regaled me with tales of his glory days, beating up gay men in downtown Cleveland when they showed interest. I quickly recanted and knew I'd have to live this one out alone. He was ashamed, and passed that on to me.

After a brief encounter with the gospel when I was 18, only to be told I'd lost my salvation for being gay, I went back to that identity with a vengeance. Soon after I decided to join the Navy and leave Ohio for good. I spent the next several years in San Diego, where I immersed myself in the gay community. More relief.

Fake It Till You Make It

I eventually met a sailor named Tom Cordell, who was interested in doing a Navigator's Bible study with me. While I agreed to do it (he was good-looking), I didn't tell him I was gay and transgendered. I'd work as a Navy

cook during the day, meet with Tom, and memorize his verses. Then I'd go home to my people, where I'd cross-dress and engage in drunken immorality. No one was the wiser. It was the perfect double life.

I even got baptized in 1977. It was at a megachurch where the well-known pastor advised those struggling with being gay, "Fake it till you make it." So I double-downed on my commitment to play-acting. The Navy sent me overseas, and I decided to finally leave this lifestyle behind. I'd also decided that since God didn't care much for me and my kind, I'd find a nice girl, marry her, and eat the crumbs of her blessings. And I'd continue faking it all the while.

I met Linda at an Overseas Christian Servicemen's Center in the Philippines. She worked as a school nurse on base, was interested in ministry, and had a beautiful singing voice. We blended well, and I liked her. That was all I needed. I eventually proposed, she said yes, and we got married.

We moved to Dallas in September 1979, where I started at Dallas Bible College. Life was going to be great . . . except for this nagging same-sex attraction and desire to be a woman. I couldn't shake it. I tried and tried to deny it, but it wouldn't go away. So I faked it harder.

After we found out we were pregnant with our son, I decided it was time to let her in on my secret. I told her I'd been lying by keeping this from her. She was, of course, devastated. I desperately tried to reassure her, to no avail.

I started meeting with a pastor who then met another man struggling with similar issues. Then another. I met a few others and before long it became clear there was a support group forming. We started a ministry to gays and lesbians during the AIDS epidemic of the mid- to late-'80s. It was a frenzy of expectation, trying to help so many desperate souls stop behaving recklessly. I was doing all I could do to white-knuckle it, to live up to my own

demands, and to pretend as best I could. I couldn't allow my veneer to crack, lest I fall completely apart.

Which eventually happened.

Failing at Faking

Boundaries failed. People got hurt. Relationships crumbled. Eventually I left the ministry, then the church, and finally God. I was diagnosed as bipolar and depressed. I'd been disowned by my family. I gained a lot of weight. I smoked two packs of Marlboro Reds a day. I was agoraphobic and hadn't left my house in years. I essentially abandoned my dear wife. I had failed my sons. I proved myself useless, hopeless, helpless.

Late one night when Linda was at a conference and my sons had gone to sleep, I started writing my letter, razor blades at the ready. "I've faked it as long as I can fake it, and I can no longer make it." I was in the middle of my final instructions for her when she walked in the door much earlier than expected, thwarting my plans.

She had been to a grief conference, ironically, and said she had a list of 40 things I'd never grieved in my life. I told her I wasn't going to grieve them. Living through all that sorrow and shame hurt badly enough the first time; why go through it again? But at her insistence I gave it a shot. The verse came to me almost audibly: "Blessed are those who mourn" (Matt. 5:4).

So I began grieving that day for real. And I continue to this day. I'd thought Christians were supposed to forget what lies behind, but this was different. I recalled all the abuse, the put-downs, the bullying, the humiliation, along with all my faults and failings. That's when I realized Jesus could have stopped it all, but he didn't. He must have had something better in mind.

Fingerprints on Every Page

Redemption. That was what he was planning for me. So that night I became a mourning person: "Tears are for the evening, but joy comes in the morning" (Ps. 30:5). Our mourning informs our "morning." By not being afraid to feel the pain that comes from sin, sorrow, shame, and suffering, we find reconciliation and redemption. In fact, we find what we were hungry for all along: Jesus himself.

As I think about that terrified little boy 50 years ago, it's as if I can hear Jesus saying, *I know this brute of a daddy and other bullies and abusers are hurting you deeply, but oh, just you wait. Wait and see how I use this, not only to embrace you, but to give your life such value, such meaning. You're going to have something so good to share, a way to love others, a way to preach me. It will be worth it. You feel like a victim now, but I'm going to make you so much better than if all this had never happened to you in the first place. You're actually going to end up more than a conqueror* (Rom. 8:37).

> *I can embrace my story because I have been embraced by the Author of my story.*

I repented and was able to love Linda as the man I was designed to be. I now get to be a real father to my three sons. The only reason I even get to write these words is the result of that story. And I do mean *get* to. What joy! I can rejoice in my story today—all of it—because Jesus's fingerprints are over every page. I can embrace my story because I have been embraced by the Author of my story. To now get to go to my counseling office each morning and watch our Savior mend wounded hearts is "joy inexpressible and full of glory!" (1 Pet. 1:8). Indeed, "where sin increased, grace

abounded all the more" (Rom. 5:20).

It's not about having dramatic stories, but desperate ones. I was a mess. I still am. But thankfully, Jesus loves a good mess.

Jim Pocta is a psychotherapist and biblical counselor in Dallas. He's a follower of Jesus, husband to Linda, father to three wonderful sons, father-in-law to three incredible daughters-in-law, grandfather to three amazing grandchildren, and an elder at New St. Peter's Presbyterian Church (PCA).

Celibate Gay Christians: Neither Shockingly Conservative nor Worryingly Liberal

A new book uses stories and statistics to dispel stereotypes and suspicion.

Ed ShawJune 21, 2019

Being a celibate gay Christian means being an object of suspicion. The wider LGBTQ community sees you as shockingly conservative ("You think gay sex is *wrong*?"), while the wider evangelical community sees you as worryingly liberal ("You call yourself *gay*?").

One day, someone will be expressing disgust toward your "fundamentalist" beliefs. On the next, someone else is targeting your "perverted" sexual orientation. Disparate groups see you as an existential threat, and their attacks can be fierce, as recent online responses to conferences like Revoice and ministries like Spiritual Friendship and Living Out would attest.

Researchers Mark Yarhouse and Olya Zaporozhets step bravely (foolishly?) into this battleground with their comprehensive study of people like me: *Costly Obedience: What We Can Learn from the Celibate Gay Christian Community*. It's an important book with an academic feel that grows more pastoral as you read on. Yarhouse has written multiple volumes on LGBTQ experience based on careful research from the Institute for the Study of Sexual Identity at Regent University in Virginia, where both of the authors teach. I wouldn't agree with everything he's ever written, but I thank God for the gracious tenor of his contributions.

This newest book is essentially a listening exercise, based on an in-depth survey of celibate gay Christians. You hear their stories of milestone events and experiences in church life and ministry—as well as research that maps their mental health outcomes and relational challenges. But they are not the only voices recorded: There's also input from friends, along with some fascinating insights into the perspectives of some evangelical pastors. The authors helpfully add their own measured reflections.

Certain conversation topics could prove controversial. We hear differing thoughts, for instance, on such questions as the origins of same-sex attraction, the correct labels to use (is it "gay," "same-sex attracted," or something else?), the possibility of same-sex desires that aren't wholly sinful, and the prospect of changing one's sexual orientation. But one of the authors' strongest points is the need to discuss these issues more carefully. They write, "Some church leaders and some celibate gay Christians seem to us, at times, to be describing two different things, rather than disagreeing on precisely the same thing."

Article continues below

This appeal for a better conversation within evangelicalism couldn't be timelier. The danger today is that some celibate gay Christians who appear to be drifting away from orthodoxy will make a clean break, precisely because of the lack of understanding (at best) and hatred (at worse) coming from more conservative voices. The book provides stories and

statistics that help evangelicals appreciate where celibate gay Christians are coming from. Too much miscommunication is happening via angry tweets and polemical blog posts, and the careful research presented here could help set things right.

The standout chapters of *Costly Obedience* come toward the end. Chapter 5 contains excellent advice on how churches can better care for celibate gay Christians, including a moving and persuasive plea to "drop the language war" around sexual identity labels. As a pastor, I heartily second the authors' request to "maintain a consistent standard" when it comes to challenging any sexual sin: It is amazing how blind we can be to our double standards.

I most appreciated chapter 7, "How Celibate Gay Christians Could Strengthen the Church," which offers a wonderful counter-narrative to the fear that gay people only ever pose a threat. I wanted to cheer out loud when I read passages like this:

> What we are suggesting is that the costly obedience of celibate gay Christians should impact the full church by being a model of what we are all called to live into: a life of sacrifice in which the hardships we face are given meaning and significance in relation to the passion of Christ. And the church needs to consider what it means to share in that cost.

In God's providence, I ended up reading this book during Holy Week and writing this review the morning of Good Friday itself. *Costly Obedience* has encouraged me to continue taking up my cross and following Jesus. And it has given me a renewed hope that my lived experience will benefit not just myself but the wider church that Christ has bought through his own, infinitely costlier obedience.

Ed Shaw is the pastor of Emmanuel City Centre in Bristol (UK) and author of

Same-Sex Attraction and the Church: The Surprising Plausibility of the Celibate Life (InterVarsity Press).

Have something to add about this? See something we missed? Share your feedback here.

Queer Hippo: musings on human sexuality

steve

[This is a 'Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis' post: the ideas have been in my head for several years, and I've been wondering what, if anything, to do with them. Then I thought of the title, and just had to publish somewhere. There's a book here - I'd be interested to know if readers of the blog think I should write it.]

The debate on human sexuality as it is being conducted in every Western denomination of which I am aware is being conducted badly. An assumption is shared by both sides of the argument, an assumption which would be denied, on the one hand, by contemporary queer theory, and on the other by the ethical reflections of the greatest bishop of Hippo, St Augustine. This post is about the things that queer theory and Christian ethics in the tradition of St Augustine meet and agree on – they do not agree about everything, but they do about a surprising amount.

At the level of denominational politics (there are exceptions, I know, but their voices are not being heard in the denominations as far as I can see), the debate on human sexuality in Western denominations is being conducted on the grounds of 'what is normal': is heterosexual monogamy the only pattern of sexual expression that is 'normal'? (In which case the ministry and the blessing of the church should be restricted to traditional western marriage.) Or, is it 'normal' also to be gay or lesbian? (In which case people committed to faithful and exclusive gay/lesbian relationships should be accepted as ministers of the church, and such relationships should be blessed.)

From the perspective of contemporary queer theory, there is only one possible response to debates of this sort: profound sadness at their failure to address reality.

From the perspective of St Augustine's sexual ethic, there is only one possible response to debates of this sort: profound sadness at their failure to address reality.

Let's start with queer theory; here we need to look at Judith Butler's developments of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*. Foucault demonstrated (with extensive boring empirical/historical evidence of the sort a postmodern icon is not really supposed to collect, but then Foucault, like Derrida, was always considerably more intelligent than those who defined the category of 'contemporary postmodern icon'...) that modern Western constructions of sexuality are, well, modern and Western. Prior to Freud and Wilde, no-one considered themselves to be heterosexual or gay or lesbian, or behaved as if they did. Same-sex attraction and action was routine, of course, but there was no sense that a man attracted to men should therefore be less attracted to women. Equally, other mores were at work in other times and other places. Famously, in ancient Greece, 'normal' sexual attraction for a man (who was a member of the culturally dominant class) involved being attracted both to a wife and to one or several young male apprentices; in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, until recently, polygamy was normal; almost endless other constructions of sexuality can be found in history and across the world today.

On this basis, Foucault proposed that *sexual identity is socially constructed*. Our culture offers us certain permissible ('normal') ways of regulating our sexual desires, and there is a powerful, for most overwhelming, cultural pressure on us to conform to one or another of the permissible options; the permissible options, however – the accounts of what is normal – vary from

culture to culture. Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, analysed how this social construction happens in our Western culture, and proposed that we established as 'normal' a link between (biologically determined) sex, (culturally constructed) gender, and sexual desire. Successful inhabiting of the culture involves (amongst many other things, of course) constructing a gender identity which conforms to culturally-determined accounts of what is proper to your biological sex (becoming 'masculine' or 'feminine'), and regulating your sexual desires in accord with that identity: manly men desire feminine women, and *vice-versa*. Butler proposes a strategy of resistance: the conscious and public adoption of non-standard gender identities, to expose and disempower the cultural hegemony that controls us.

(Of course, Butler wrote over two decades ago. In many of the subcultures that make up Western culture gay and lesbian identities are now accepted as 'normal', and to conform to those identities is an equally successful way of inhabiting the culture. This is not to deny, and certainly not to excuse, the homophobia that still exists in many places, but it is to recognise that in the culturally-dominant discourses in the West, homophobia is now – rightly, of course – unacceptable. It wasn't when I was a child.)

I suppose, though, most people who are interested in these questions have read Foucault and Butler: to the next step is perhaps a little more obscure, but goes by the name of queer theory. This remains a contested term, but my description would be something like this: queer theory is an analysis of gender and sexuality which refuses in principle any suggestion that certain patterns are more 'normal' than other patterns, because any such suggestion would impose the oppressive category of 'abnormal' on those who did not fit. A recent scare story about the federal government in Australia proposing to recognise 23 genders did the rounds on some conservative Christian blogs. If you trace the story back it happens not to be true; the origin is the list of terms in §2.2 of this discussion paper, which

identifies 23 terms presently used in Australia to name chosen gender identities. Even if the original story had been true, however, this would not be enough for a proper queer theorist: the person who cannot find a home in any of the 23 identities defined as 'normal' would remain oppressed.

(There is a poster displayed around the place here in Scotland at the moment produced and distributed by Stonewall Scotland; it shows a dozen or so family groups – one or more children with parents who are (apparently) hetero, gay, and lesbian, of varying ethnicities, some with visible disabilities – under the caption 'Different families. Same love.' I confess that my immediate reaction on seeing it was to be appalled at how it constructed as abnormal the families of several of the children I was with at the time: according to Stonewall, it appears, the maximum number of adults in a family group is two, so the girl whose aunt lives with them in her house is rendered strange; adults have to be of the same generation, so the boy whose grandparent lives in his house is classed as weird; and so on. This isn't queer theory – family groups are not completely defined by sexuality – but the point is analogous.)

From the perspective of queer theory, then, a debate, like the one happening in a certain Western Christian denominations, which seeks to expand the category of 'normal' from 'heterosexual' to 'hetero, gay, and lesbian' is completely uninteresting. Oppression remains inevitable, because closed lists of norms are always oppressive. Human sexual desires are endlessly and infinitely varied, and cannot and should not be confined to certain culturally-imposed norms. All human sexuality is queer, and that is something to be celebrated, not hidden or repressed.

What of the 'Hippo' bit of 'Queer Hippo'? St Augustine analyses human fallenness as a story of misdirected desire. As fallen people, we long for things that will harm us, and discount or despise that which alone can fill

the void in our restless human lives. ('Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee.') Our perception of beauty is distorted, our desires are warped and twisted, and our longings are endlessly misdirected. This is always true of every human being, perhaps in Augustine's view especially true in regard to sexuality. As a result, for Augustine, 'normal' sexual behaviour is an ideal, lost and longed for, not a present reality. So a debate about whether heterosexual monogamy is normal or whether gay and lesbian relationships can be considered normal as well is just not interesting; it has already made an assumption (that the category of 'normal sexuality' can be used) that, east of Eden, is untenable. Human sexual desires are endlessly and infinitely varied, and cannot be confined to certain culturally-imposed norms. All human sexuality is queer, and that is something to be soberly acknowledged, not hidden or repressed.

This is important: too much conservative Christian ethics concerning human sexuality assumes that there is a norm – heterosexual monogamy – that is accessible and livable by the generality of people. The Scriptures deny this straightforwardly, of course ('If it is like *that*, it is better not to marry!' – Mt. 19:10), but conservative Christian commentators are not, unfortunately, always very interested in what the Scriptures actually say. And too much liberal Christian ethics concerning human sexuality assumes that there are a certain limited number of norms – including faithful and exclusive gay and lesbian relationships – that between them are accessible and livable by the generality of people. The Scriptures deny this straightforwardly, of course, but liberal Christian commentators are not, unfortunately, always very interested in what the Scriptures actually say.

As Augustine taught clearly, echoing the Scriptures, and the almost-united witness of the Christian tradition, any sexual discipline – including heterosexual monogamy – is a practice of ascesis, which calls those who

embrace it to deny and redirect their desires in order to conform them to the gospel. Heterosexual monogamy, like celibacy, is not normal or easy for anyone; it is an accepted discipline that requires the constant and rigorous disciplining and denial of personal desires to be lived out even remotely adequately. Any adequately Christian form of gay or lesbian relationship would not be normal or easy for anyone either; it too would be an accepted discipline that requires the constant and rigorous disciplining and denial of personal desires to be lived out even remotely adequately.

Is heterosexual monogamy normal? No. Augustine and Foucault can agree on that. Are faithful and committed gay and lesbian relationships normal? No. Augustine and Foucault can agree on that also. In Hippo, nothing is normal, and everything is queer.

Of course, even if we accept all of this, we can still disagree about human sexuality. We might all recognise that patterns of human desiring are endlessly varied, and most of us will, I assume, accept that at least some desires need to be disciplined, not indulged (at a minimum, desires that involve non-consensual acts, or children below a certain age). The question is not about our desires, endlessly varied as they are, but about the practices of ascesis that we regard as appropriate.

The Christian tradition has always regarded celibacy to be appropriate, when lived as a gospel-shaped and heroic regulation of personal desire that tends to conform us to Christlikeness; the Christian tradition has almost always regarded heterosexual monogamous marriage to be appropriate, when lived as a gospel-shaped and heroic regulation of personal desire that tends to conform us to Christlikeness; if the Christian tradition is to come to regard faithful and exclusive gay and lesbian relationships as appropriate, it should only be because we have discovered ways in which these too can be lived as gospel-shaped and heroic regulations of personal desire that tend

to conform us to Christlikeness.

The issue for the churches should be what is gospel-shaped, not what is 'normal'.

His Mercy is on them that Fear Him

Matthew Lee Anderson on August 2, 2018

I was honored to give the following remarks at the Spiritual Friendship pre-conference. There may be minor variations between the video and the text. I learned much from the other presenters, and especially would commend Johana Finegan's exceptional defense of Spiritual Friendship and Revoice.

Speaking rightly about the Christian formation of sexual desire requires first speaking about something other than sex. Desires are shaped by our theological and communal practices; to consider sexual desire outside this broader context misconstrues it from the outset. I take this to be the heart

of the Augustinian legacy on moral formation: sexual desires are fundamentally about something deeper than or more transcendent than sex itself. Because of this, chastity requires the reorientation or transposition of the fires that animate sexual passion, rather than their extinction. Pace C.S. Lewis, it is not that the pornography addict's desires for sex are too strong, but that his other desires are too weak—the intense longing for an immediate consummation is only the lowest form of what is meant to be a more radiant and enduring love. Chastity in our youth allows us to enjoy the full flowering of fidelity as we age—which is often a sexless intimacy founded upon years of life together. This form of love is foreign to many of us, children as we are of the divorce generation—but it is deeper and more powerful than the intensity of sexual passion that occupies so much of our attention in youth.

The appropriate formation of our sexual desires, then, begins in an explicitly non-sexual key. The emergence of a sexual desire for a particular person is the culmination of a long train of reasoning, the premises of which are mostly invisible to us and the control over which is largely indirect. The path toward ordering such desires toward God's love begins, then, with posing the question of whether it is sex and its pleasures that they aim at—or whether the sexual desire is an echo or reflection, of a deeper and more profound longing for intimacy and love that sexual union can only imperfectly anticipate.

Assessing the formation of our sexual desires within a broader context holds both promise and peril for gay Christians, at least to this observer and (I hope) friend. Such a stance helpfully reveals that the questions surrounding sanctifying sexual desire are no different for gay Christians than anyone else—and their answers are not particularly interesting. For all the constructive attempts to 'make room' in our churches for gay Christians, the actual path toward sanctification seems almost tediously boring. A life

immersed in Scripture and the practices of the church is the only reliable bulwark against infidelity. Regular communion, contemplative prayer, occasional fasting from food, the daily nourishment of Scripture, and other ascetical and communal practices are the authorized means of cultivating sanctity in the privacy of our bedrooms—and, though it is much more challenging, within the privacy of our hearts.

This deflationary attitude toward sexual desire is comprehensive, in that it includes desire's fallen dimensions and its natural ordering. Our lives and world show, if anything, that God has a forbearance toward sin that we are reluctant to imitate. It is impossible to be more exacting than our Savior about the scope of our sanctification—but it is possible to demand such perfection faster than He does. The tyrannical urgency of immediate sanctification undermines the wide gift of God's forgiving grace, thereby making sin appear more important than it actually is. Sin is so little, so impotent, so finally insignificant when set next to the astonishing love of Christ. And being set free from our proclivities toward sin requires (paradoxically) developing a dismissiveness toward its wiles: what appears in the moment of temptation as a great and terrible power seems but a trivial charade when the hour of weakness passes, so that one wonders why one was ever drawn to the wrong in the first place.

At the same time, the celibacy of our Savior inherently makes the satisfaction of sexual desires (at most) only of secondary importance. The expanded understanding of human flourishing Christianity offers deflates sexuality's pretension to the throne of our souls, and reminds us of the many more interesting and subtle ways sinfulness can take hold of our lives. Focusing our desires through repeating 'Thy Kingdom come' daily allows us to consider questions of sexual desire from an inadvertent, sideways point of view. The discovery of such a deflationary attitude toward sexual desire is contrary to the approach critics of this conference have taken—but also

contrary to the conference itself, which intensifies the importance of this particular set of experiences for the sake of responding to them theologically. It might be disappointing to hear little at Revoice about being gay, and much about seemingly irrelevant Christian practices. But one wonders whether we might all be better off for it.

Still, this deflationary attitude toward sexual desire seems impossible in part because of the controversies that have swirled around this conference—controversies animated in no large part by critics whose own outlooks on these questions are as unremittingly sexualized as the world they claim to stand against. To this co-belligerent, such a contentious environment seems to pose peculiar dangers for how gay Christians pursue the sanctification of their sexual lives. Despite the similarities in the theoretical questions about desire and identity, the stakes surrounding the answers are markedly higher for gay Christians. A young man may be unchaste in his relations with his wife; yet the fruit of such disobedience will likely remain invisible to everyone but the most saintly and sanctified among us. The lesbian couple, though, does not enjoy the luxury of this ambiguity—if it is indeed one. The wrongness of such a union is not only on the surface; but such a public form makes the illicitness of their sexual lives transparent in a way that unchastity within marriage will not be. This means, though, that *permissible* forms of life among chaste members of the same-sex will invariably invite controversy if they too closely approximate so-called "gay marriages." Others within the church will doubtlessly struggle to keep distinct what mature gay Christians separate, in part because they have been unwittingly captured by the very sexualized ethos they decry. This tension keeps alive the possibility of 'scandal' within our Christian communities, a technical term that is probably worth recovering. I suspect the practices gay Christians pursue to order their sexual desires cannot be extricated from this possibility, and must be constrained accordingly.

This means, however, that gay Christians will carry a double burden. They are tasked with the appropriate formation of their sexual desires, as we all are. But they must also navigate such formation in the midst of a pervasive skepticism about the attempt to faithfully reclaim licit aspects of being gay while saying 'no' to illicit sexual desires. (Such skepticism comes from both inside *and* outside the church.) I imagine some gay Christians are tempted to throw off this double-burden by embracing an (ostensibly) sanctified form of the 'pride' that has animated secular gay communities. (This is a temptation those in this room have admirably avoided.) By *celebrating,* and not simply affirming, the lingering and licit marks of same-sex sexual desires on a person's life, gay Christians could simultaneously escape the stigma they are saddled with and dissolve any burden of proof that might be upon their lives. Such a temptation doubtlessly seems reasonable. Yet I would encourage gay Christians to consider welcoming the double burden as an avenue for sanctification instead, even while carrying on the work of pointing out the diseased roots of criticisms they receive. One mark of chastity is the willingness to submit to the heightened scrutiny of others, even if they are imperfect witnesses on such questions. The newly married couple rightly tests each other's non-marital relationships for faithfulness, while the couple enjoying their fortieth anniversary of chastely married life might enjoy wider freedoms for friendships outside their union. Fruit must be proved before it can be responsibly enjoyed or appealed to. Consider Leviticus 19, which prohibits Israel from enjoying the fruit of trees in the promised land until their fifth season. It is an odd injunction—and yet Christians who seek to cultivate faithfulness in their sexual lives might consider a similar kind of patience.

Gay Christians who do gladly accept this double burden have the high calling to remind the church that the limits and prohibitions God has placed on our lives are *sources* of our freedom and joy, and not their foe. Christ's

celibacy allows a deflationary attitude toward sexual desire—but does so in conjunction with the New Testament's sharp denunciations of same-sex sexual acts and its heightened concern about the intentions and desires surrounding our sexual lives. The juxtaposition might seem like a contradiction: but chastity lives within the interconnection. Diminishing or downplaying the forcefulness of Scripture's prohibitions cuts us off from the power of Christ's affirmations. The appropriate formation of our sexual desires requires seeing Scripture's prohibitions not as matters for embarrassment, but as the necessary and glad boundaries of our of our freedom: "Oh, how I *love* Thy law!" Gay Christians are required to say 'yes' to those aspects of their life and history that will remain when all the questions of sexual desire and temptation are set aside. The personal identity of gay Christians will be irrevocably marked by the peculiar set of choices and affections they are called to cultivate, choices and affections that even in the fullness of their sanctification will doubtlessly contain emphases and aspects distinct from those that will mark my own life, or the lives of other straight Christians. But gay Christians are also enjoined to pursue this 'Yes' with an unhesitating gladness about the 'No' that bounds it.

Holding together the affirmations and prohibitions of Scripture in this way is crucial for cultivating the peculiar fusion of reverential fear and love that make chastity such a significant virtue. Commending fear at a conference for gay Christians doubtlessly awakens anxious memories about the shame and punishment that has so oft been given for such desires. Yet the antidote to an unhealthy fear is not its elimination, but its transformation by the affirmation and love of God. The 'fear of the Lord' remains the beginning of wisdom. A reverential love for another person is founded upon the recognition of their beauty and goodness, and the need for prohibitions to preserve them—not upon the possibility of punishment. Love requires

limits: we love creaturely goods only when we use them with reverence. It is for the sake of beer and burgundy, as Chesterton noted, that we do not drink too much of them. In the same way, there is no chastity without fear; there is no love without revering those made in God's image, and without a radical unwillingness to wrong them even in the secret places of our hearts. Charity enfolds fear into love because the object of desire is *too* good, *too* wonderful to look upon except in the context and way that God has appointed.

Such reverential fear has special importance, I think, for two contexts that are closely related to the appropriate formation of our sexual desires. The first is friendship. While many gay Christians have rightly turned toward friendship as a bulwark against the isolation that so often accompanies being gay, my own interest here is more in the way friendships form our dispositions and desires. Perhaps no aspect of friendship is so morally potent as the way it makes acts appear more plausible as options for our own lives than they would be otherwise. A young couple on their way to marriage hears stories from close friends about a pre-marital tryst, and feels their own commitment to chastity weaken accordingly. A childless couple who are morally opposed to IVF learns dear friends are pursuing it, and wonders anew whether their own reasons for choosing otherwise are sufficient. Acts and choices by those who we consider intimate friends inherently raise questions about our own choices. Friendship with the world is enmity with God, *not* because the world is void of any good, but because intimacy with it makes it harder to avoid approving the illicit forms of life it generates. Without deliberate practices of resistance, our habits of thought and speech will inevitably conform to moral ecosystem we inhabit. And nowhere is that ecosystem most fully present, or most attractive, than in the lives of our friends.

If friendship is one path toward sanctifying our sexual desires, then, it must

be formed around the set of affirmations and negations, permissions and prohibitions, that mark the chaste Christian life. A *shared,* unswerving commitment to the absolute and inviolable prohibition on same-sex sexual acts preserves our freedom for friendships as intense and devout as Jonathan and David's (non-sexual) intimacy. When such a joint commitment is lacking, the friendship takes on a different moral character. In friendship, the choices and beliefs of one person are contagious: they change the moral environment for the other person. This means, though, that morally bad choices by friends require not simply tolerant acquiescence, but active resistance, at least if our own characters are not to be badly formed by the behavior of our friends.

Of course, the possibility of contagion only arises when two people have enough otherwise in common to make the other's choice appear plausible. The Christian couple who are opposed to IVF will not feel their resolve weaken in the same way when their non-Christian friends undertake it. Our friends' choices unsettle our own outlooks only when in cases where we share other commitments and doctrines upon which we have each based our lives. This feature of 'moral contagiousness,' though, means it is easier for Christians to be friends with gay *atheists* than same-sex affirming '*Christians*.' The gay atheist asserts the licitness of same-sex unions on the basis of premises and assumptions distinct from those that mark the Christian's life. But the same-sex affirming 'Christian' attempts to found the licitness of such unions within the faith itself, giving them a plausibility for other Christians that standard secular arguments cannot offer. Though both groups affirm same-sex unions, the latter do so in ways that do not scandalize the Christian community, or add to the confusion about the Church's external witness on these questions. The responsibility to disfellowship from those Christians who remain unrepentant in their sins *or* the approval of them seems to be founded upon these principles. The

stakes for faithfulness in our moral lives extends, then, even into the kinds of friendships we cultivate. The centrality of friendship for moral formation offers a particularly important proving ground for the cultivation of chastity's fear and love, and our commitment to the prohibitions that give such chastity its vibrancy and form.

The second context in which the reverential fear of chastity comes to bear is more expansive, and more pervasive—and therefore less concrete or defined. It seems to this observer that one thing which remains after the purification of same-sex sexual desires—besides faith, hope, and charity—is the complex set of noticings and attractions toward members of one's own sex. That is, there is a way in which 'gay' can describe a form of *seeing,* an insight into or awareness of the beauties or glories of one's own sex that non-gay members of the sex must *learn*. This habit or tendency of so judging is aesthetic—but that does not mean it is reductionistically physical. The young man who notices a young woman observes her body, to be sure: but his complex set of judgments and attractions encompasses the range of traits and features that typically inhere *within* the body. It is not simply a female as such that one notices, but a woman—who is, in that moment, something of an archetype. To characteristically notice and be drawn toward males is to see something and be drawn toward something about *men.* And for the gay Christian, it is to see and be drawn to something *true*: gay Christians have discovered something worthwhile about those to whom they are attracted, something good—something that the other sex generally already understands.

But to speak of the cultivation of chastity in this aesthetic way is, I think, to collapse the differences between gay and straight Christians. Christian marriage requires that the male learn to see the world from the female's point of view—the woman's well-being and interests are rarely what the newly married man presumes them to be, so caught up is he in his own

maleness. The freeing of women to be themselves is near the heart of so much marital frustration—and so much of its comedy. Marriage requires empathy, in other words: it requires imaginatively identifying with a person whose sex is not our own, so that we can see the world as it is. Yet this imaginative empathy also requires that the male see himself, and other males, in this new light. Empathizing with one's wife means discovering her reasons for being attracted to a male—which are usually not the reasons a man would expect, dense and self-conceited as he doubtlessly is.

The formation of our aesthetic vision as the presupposition and context for sexual desire thus requires a willingness to step outside our own sex and discover the world from the other's point of view. Such a responsibility falls upon gay and straight Christians alike, though its practices may take a different form in each. Chastity means seeing and loving the beauty of the world as God has made it, including the goods of both sexes. But it requires seeing and loving the goods of both sexes within two interrelated limits. First, chastity preserves and affirms the distinctive and irreplaceable differences between the sexes—rather than collapsing them together into the foggy haze of 'queerness.' Empathy requires difference; men who transcend sex by identifying *as* women, rather than *with* women, undermine the beauty of God's created order that chastity responds to and preserves. Similarly, learning to see and love the world from the distinct perspective and virtues of the other sex deepens the experience of one's own sex—rather than leading us to emulate the other.

Second, the cultivation of our aesthetic vision requires learning to see the twin forms of embodied glory in male and female as *persons,* who are not simply archetypes of beauty that awaken our fascinations, but are many-dimensioned mysterious creatures with histories and futures independent of our own. Here within our aesthetic awareness reverential fear and love must also abide, by surrounding and infusing our orientations with a

sanctity and holiness that allows us to be free within them. Chastity requires renouncing any impulse to say *mine* about those we are drawn to: such persons are God's, not ours, and only ours insofar as they are gifts from God. In this way, the erotic Christian life is free from the frenzied pressures and strivings its less sanctified forms take. The fire of chastity has at its center a cross of self-denial and self-abnegation, a cross that (as T.S. Eliot puts it) goes "by the way of dispossession" as the only way to possess that which we do not. To the pure all things are pure, precisely because they are *not* ours. Pride, which takes possession, can only be a contradiction and desecration of the Christian affirmation of *eros*. For the young man who allows every noticing or attraction he experiences to transform into a desire for sexual activity is locked within pride's grip: while he has noticed the beautiful young woman as an archetype, he has almost certainly failed to realize *she* has not noticed *him*—leaving him to fantasize about having his own interest reciprocated, a central component to a fully formed sexual desire.

A chaste vision of the world, then, comes about through undertaking a comprehensive set of practices that inculcate both a fearful reverence and loving affirmation of ourselves and the world around us. Perhaps no practice is so potent for the cultivation of a Christian, de-sexualized eroticism as communal worship—Paul's curious admonition about female head-coverings in the assembly seems to indicate as much. It is worth considering whether our evangelical megachurches have sufficiently bounded their worship with the kind of fearful reverence that recognizes the tremendous power of holiness. The atmosphere of much evangelical worship is highly eroticized—yet sometimes in ways or forms that appear as sexualized as ordinary concert music. The cultivation of eros within our communities needs to preserve the modesty and strangeness of holiness, and the forms of mystery and distance that preserve it. The intensity of

religious affection that relegates sexual desires to their proper place in our lives should be *difficult* to experience, not easy—for it takes the form of a cross. At the same time, reading seems peculiarly important for the formation of this expanded vision: immersion in the narrative of Scripture makes us alive to the many facets and dimensions of life that are only tangentially related to sexual desire, helping us to recognize pride's power in every other realm of life.

Other forms of literature allow us to cultivate friendships and loves with robustly textured, fictional persons—in ways in which the reciprocity required for sexual desires to emerge in their fullness is impossible. There is no school for imaginative empathy like the novel, and perhaps no better way to cultivate wisdom while remaining innocent than learning through the proxy worlds fiction creates. Reverence for those around us requires avoiding unnecessary experimentation; there is no substitute for the wisdom that comes from the failures and experiences of others, fictional or otherwise. Finally, the cultivation of erotic sentiments requires contemplative prayer; it takes the form of sitting alone in a dark room and feeling the energies and desires that animate our sexual lives wash over us, so that in offering them up to God we can begin to glimpse and taste a satisfaction we cannot now imagine.[1] Such a practice must be bound to Scripture and immersed within it—for Scripture sets the form for our experiences, and the cultivation of our religious affections within contemplative prayer can only happen if we learn to love within its limits.

The task of being a gay Christian is, then, not so unlike simply being a Christian. Gay Christians can remind the church through their cultivation of a chaste eroticism that the end and aim of marriage is not sex itself, but the vision of a glory and beauty that transcends it. Such a task is perhaps harder for straight Christians, for whom the conflation of sex and *eros* is so natural and easy. The burden of skepticism from Christians who are

thoroughgoing Freudians is a heavy cross to carry. But while despair doubtlessly crouches at the door, I plead with you upon the grace and love of God to not grow weary in your doing good of living a chaste life. The double burden upon you need not be an enemy of sanctification, but a most severe mercy. It is for the sake of those who persecute Him that our Lord takes up His cross.

In the same way, it will be for the sake of our churches that gay Christians welcome the heightened scrutiny others give them, and so by the integrity and holiness of their lives have the confidence to boldly call our communities to repentance. By cultivating a reverential fear and love within a life of joyful freedom, gay Christians can remind our churches of the power and beauty of the chastity they have forgotten. In many of our churches, Scripture's prohibitions have been reduced to litmus tests to identify who is faithful—while such communities have simultaneously avoided any prohibitions from Scripture or tradition that might constrain the desires of the married heterosexual couples in our pews. Remaining complicit in the attitudes and atmospheres beneath the practices we denounce unsurprisingly destroys the compassion and love that should saturate our witness. A 'prophetic' witness on these questions requires integrity—and evangelical churches have none.

Because of this, though, gay Christians have the unique opportunity and charge to disclose to the church the true meaning of Scripture's prohibitions as the sources of joy—and in so doing help our churches begin to love the prohibitions that stand over their marriages as well. This can only happen, though, if gay Christians embrace the burden of the cross within their same-sex attractions, and cultivate the reverential fear that holiness demands. And for their faithful renunciation of their same-sex sexual desires, gay Christians will receive back the freedom to delight in their own sex and the world God has placed us all in, transforming their scars of self-

denial into marks of glory. Such, I take it, is the good news for gay Christians —and for us all.

Enjoy the article? Pay the writer.

1. On my account, *erotic* is a technical term that names not sexual desires *per se,* nor the romantic *per se,* but the energy of desire that makes us discontent with the world as it appears to us. It can be directed toward any variety of ends, but is properly ordered toward a longing for union with God Himself. This is, admittedly, an idiosyncratic use–though I would argue that it is Plato's use of the term, and fits Augustine's understanding of desire as well.

The Nashville Statement, the Airing of Differences, and the State of the PCA

Recently, in anticipation of the Presbyterian Church in America's annual Assembly, I wrote the longest blog post ever. Here, I share some final, releated thoughts in retrospect.

This year, our central and impassioned focus in the PCA was on marriage and sexuality, especially concerning people in our pews and pulpits who (a) experience same-sex attraction or "SSA," and (b) seek encouragement and support in their efforts to honor and obey the historic, biblical teaching on sex and marriage.

On Monday, a 300-person conference convened called "A Time to Stand." The conference was a response and critique of a parachurch ministry called Revoice. Speakers included Albert Mohler, Kevin DeYoung, Ligon Duncan, David Strain, Tim Geiger, and a few others.

Revoice is not a ministry of the PCA. But many in the PCA have attended their conferences and benefitted from their efforts. This was evidenced by another, 500-person gathering mid-week, in which Revoice leaders were warmly welcomed, praised, and prayed over.

During the Assembly itself, there was an overture petitioning PCA pastors and elders to publicly affirm the so-called "Nashville Statement," which has been a source of disagreement even among the most conservative evangelicals, as "a biblically faithful" Statement.

After debate, the Nashville Statement overture passed by a slim majority. 60% voted in its favor, and 40%, including me, voted against

it.

(You can hear my 4-minute rationale for voting against the overture here.)

The Nashville Statement: Many "For" and many "Against"

One convincing argument in favor of affirming the Nashville Statement came from Kevin DeYoung, who pointed out that the original signers of the Statement are not extremists. They include some of the foremost leaders in evangelicalism today, including Russell Moore, D.A. Carson, John Piper, John Frame, Michael Horton, R.C. Sproul, Alistair Begg, and DeYoung himself, as well as same-sex attracted men and women like Sam Alberry, Vaughn Roberts, Rosaria Butterfield, and Jackie Hill Perry.

Among these and the other signers, with whom I disagree on the usefulness of the Nashville Statement but not on much else, are many of my own good friends.

On the "against" side of the debate, there were also many of us who did not sign the Nashville Statement. We, too, are not extremists. We, too, love the Bible and Jesus and biblical doctrine and ethics with all of our hearts.

We all can and do agree with over 95% of the Nashville Statement's content. But its matter-of-fact tone (We affirm...We deny...) strikes us as insufficient for pastoral care, evangelism, and mission. We believe it lacks the warmth and empathy required for navigating something as delicate and volatile as broken sexuality. It also lacks humble acknowledgment from the Church — including *our* church — of how we have at many times, and in many ways, fumbled and even caused injury to sexually broken people and those who love

them.

For an example of such injury, I encourage you to listen to this short, honest, heartfelt statement by Greg Johnson, one of our pastors who experiences SSA and is a 46-year old virgin, which Nashville Statement supporter and my friend, pastor Richard Phillips, described as "moving."

In the same way that many esteemed leaders signed the Nashville Statement, there are also many who didn't, including all three of the PCA's most recent moderators: George Robertson, Alex Jun, and Irwyn Ince.

Curiously, not many ministry leaders who specialize in sexual brokenness signed the Nashville Statement either. Examples include Tim Geiger and John Freeman from Harvest USA, Nate Collins and Stephen Moss from Revoice, Sean Maney from First Light, Pieter Valk from Equip, Caleb Kaltenbach from Messy Grace, Preston Sprinkle from the Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender, and Wheaton psychologist and expert in sexual brokenness, Mark Yarhouse (Yarhouse shares his misgivings about the Nashville Statement here). These are all evangelical leaders, thinkers, and practitioners who are committed to the historic, biblical teaching on sex and marriage who did not sign the Nashville Statement.

Well-known thought leaders in the PCA like Tim Keller, Bryan Chappell, Scotty Smith, Stephen Um, Dan Doriani, Jerram Barrs, Charles McGowan, and Sandy Willson also did not sign the Nashville Statement.

"Mortification of Spin" podcast hosts Carl Trueman and Todd Pruitt also did not sign and wrote about why.

Many other reformed thinkers and leaders did not sign the Nashville Statement, including Thabiti Anyabwile, Sinclair Ferguson, Paul Tripp, David Powlison, Philip Ryken, Crawford Loritts, Jeremy Treat, Tom Nelson, Richard Winter, and Richard Pratt.

Both inside and outside of the PCA, it is quite clear that there are good, godly, biblically serious, reformed thinkers who have said both "yes" and "no" to the Nashville Statement.

The 40% must learn from the 60%

On one side of the debate, Kevin DeYoung also contended that a vote for doctrinal and moral clarity is not a vote against pastoral care, and vice versa. DeYoung is right. Jesus is the Truth, and the truth will set people free, so we must always contend for truth. Paul urged pastor Timothy to watch his life and doctrine closely and to persevere in them, because in so doing he would save both himself and his hearers (1 Timothy 4:16). Doctrinal clarity is important. Biblically-based moral guardrails are something about which we cannot and must not be flippant, dismissive, or cavalier.

For example, while some of us aren't bothered when we hear a Christian use the word "gay" to describe his/her unique temptation and struggle (I share more detailed thoughts about that here), putting the word "gay" in front of the word "Christian" always risks confusion, and sometimes creates stumbling blocks, for people that associate the word with its more common use. This includes teenagers and children, who hear messages almost daily that "gay" is something to be affirmed versus something to be mortified. A case is made here, and understandably so, for considering a different and clearer vocabulary.

This is something that the 40% and the friends of Revoice must carefully consider.

The 60% must also learn from the 40%

On the other hand, those who are pressing for doctrinal and moral clarity must consider how discernible love, which is the defining mark of Jesus' disciples, can easily get lost in even the most valiant efforts to be doctrinally and morally clear. Without love, Paul reminds us, even moral commitment and sound doctrine are useless, and therefore worthless (1 Corinthians 13).

Tim Keller recently wrote, "Something can be true theologically, and yet at the same time the application of that truth is done inappropriately."

We mustn't fall into a similar trap as Job's counselors did. Speaking the truth in love requires emotional intelligence and warm, discernible empathy toward the struggles of others, especially when we have never walked in their shoes.

A key indicator that we are speaking the truth in love will be when people like Greg Johnson (see link above) start saying that they actually *feel* loved, listened to, understood, esteemed, and cared for, not only by some of our churches, but by all of them. Another indicator will be when our churches become widely known for how they solve the loneliness and isolation problem among chaste and same-sex attracted persons, versus being part of the actual cause. In these matters, we still have a ways to go.

As I pointed out in my short speech, there is not a single pastor or elder in the PCA who denies, diminishes, or wishes to do away with the historic, biblical teaching around sex and marriage. Our church members and neighbors are not confused about where we stand here. What some are confused about, however, is whether we possess a discernible, easy-to-detect, denomination-wide empathy toward

sexual sinners and strugglers. Whether we are in the 40% or the 60%, it should go without saying that we owe this to them, for to be a Christian is to owe a debt of love to all.

This is something that the 60% and Nashville Statement sympathizers, as well as those who are concerned about Revoice, must carefully consider.

We all must become "double majors"

Based on various factors such as wiring and experience and personal bias and the theological tribes we run with, some of us are prone to "major" in doctrinal precision and "minor" in pastoral tone. Likewise, others of us major and minor in the same things, but in the reverse.

Our shared task, as iron sharpens iron, is for all of us to become *double-majors* who are equally filled with truth and grace, with law and love, with repentance and kindness, with mortification and compassion, with moral clarity and discernible empathy...just as our Lord Jesus was.

"It is enough," our King has told us, "for the servants to be like their Master."

There is good reason to be encouraged

As part of the PCA's 40% minority, I don't think the Nashville Statement is the ideal Statement for us (see video link above). However, I am still more encouraged coming out of our Assembly than I am discouraged. In some ways, I am more optimistic about the PCA's future than I've ever been. I believe that we are, warts and all, still one of the healthiest denominations in the world.

Why do I believe this? First, each and every one of us maintains a high

view of Scripture. Second, we all want to shepherd and serve, faithfully and lovingly, those who are impacted by sexual sin and brokenness. Third, while some of us are talking past each other, the majority of us are talking *to* each other.

We are acting like every healthy family should

Throughout the Bible, God condemns divisiveness and emphasizes unity among his people. He insists that we live as one, even as we wrestle with our differences. The longest recorded prayer from Jesus is that his sheep live as one (John 17:1-26). Paul's teaching in Ephesians 2:14-16 about demolishing social dividing walls does the same. Gossip and giving a false report about each other are repudiated in the ninth commandment, Paul's letters, and elsewhere. Jews and Gentiles are told to work out their differences, and are forbidden from walking out on each other.

You get the point.

Like the early church, we in the PCA are also made up of many tribes, perspectives, pastoral models, and strategies.

Our parallel to the ancient "Jews" are the traditionalists among us, whose legitimate concern is to love God by preaching sound doctrine and doing all things decently, in order, and with abundant clarity.

Our parallel to the ancient "Gentiles" are the missionalists among us, whose legitimate concern is to love our Neighbor in ways that resemble the radical ways in which Jesus did, especially among the least, the lost, the sinful, and the broken.

Traditionalists struggle sometimes with missionalists, alleging that in their zeal for building relational bridges with sinners and strugglers,

they can be perceived as fuzzy regarding biblical doctrine and morality.

This is a fair critique.

Missionalists struggle sometimes with traditionalists, alleging that in their zeal for doctrinal precision and moral clarity, they can be perceived as lacking in care, compassion, and empathy.

This, too, is a fair critique.

As the PCA, we are, as author Scot McKnight would say, "a fellowship of differents." Like the early church, we are 100% agreed that the Bible is the Word of God, inerrant in its original manuscripts, and the only infallible rule of faith and practice. But like the Jews and Gentiles, sometimes we express our shared belief in ways that seem on the surface to be incompatible.

I believe these tensions, and the diversity that drives them, is more a strength of ours than it is a weakness. Tim Keller agrees, and you can read about why in his essay from 2010 entitled, "What's So Great About the PCA?"

Our unity has been tested before, but with other issues

Our unity in the PCA has been tested many times in the past. For example:

- Some have argued for strict subscription to our Confessional Standards, while others have argued for a more nuanced, "good faith" subscription.
- Some have argued for a narrower lexical range for the Hebrew word translated "day" in the creation account, while others have argued for a broader one.

- Some have argued for having deaconesses based on their biblically-formed convictions, while others have argued against having deaconesses based on *their* biblically-formed convictions.

One of the PCA's finest moments was when Ligon Duncan and Tim Keller passionately defended their opposing positions, very publicly and with great respect for one another, regarding deaconesses. Even though neither man has been able to persuade the other, since that time Ligon and Tim have partnered together in the forming of a seminary. Tim's view can be read here and Ligon's here.

In all these debates and amid all these differences, what makes us a healthy family is that we have stayed together and not parted ways through it all. For better and for worse, through good seasons and difficult ones, we are still together. We are still family to each other, and we are working to stay that way. I have yet to hear someone say in the wake of our Assembly, "Ok, that's it for me. That's the last straw. I'm out."

Whether we are part of the 40% or the 60%, most that I have interacted with seem to agree with items (2) and (3) of what Revoice co-founder and VP of operations, Stephen Moss, posted on social media after the Nashville Statement decision:

"Last night I felt three things very strongly:
(1) This really really hurts.
(2) I really really love these people...which makes (1) all the more true. And
(3) I'm not going anywhere. Upon reflection, I guess that's what it's like to be a family."

Like Stephen, and in my *hopefully* humble and *definitely* optimistic opinion, I believe that the Revoice/Nashville Statement debates in the

PCA present more of an opportunity for us to come together as family, as opposed to a cause for division.

Distinguishing between healthy and unhealthy families

In an unhealthy family, people either scream at and harshly judge each other, or they bury their thoughts, emotions, and viewpoints as they walk on eggshells with each other. In the PCA, except on rare occasions from the anxious and angry (and sometimes juvenile) fringes, these things are generally not happening.

Instead, what I mostly see is passionate, godly, Bible-esteeming, gospel-depending leaders trying to love and understand each other as they work through their differences. Messy though it may sometimes be, as iron sharpens iron, so one sharpens another (Proverbs 27:17).

We in the PCA are mostly debating, not fighting. Very few of our differences are moral or theological. Most of them are cultural and philosophical. The fact that we are passionately debating our differences means that we care, not only about the issues at hand and about being properly understood, but also about each other.

Toward a better, more useful "Statement"

One encouraging thing that came out of the Nashville Statement decision was our near-unanimous agreement that the Nashville Statement will be for us (a) a non-binding document that is available, but not required for use, and (b) a mere and temporary placeholder that will soon be replaced by a collaborative Statement of our own.

Our newly-elected moderator, Howie Donahoe, has been tasked with assembling a study committee that represents our diversity of perspective. Howie is the perfect person to populate this committee.

He has spent years getting people from differing perspectives to talk to each other instead of about each other, to humbly listen to and learn from one another, and to sharpen one another's perspectives. I have been one of those whom Howie has brought to the table, for which I am grateful.

This committee, once appointed, will be tasked with creating a doctrinally sound and clear, pastorally sensitive and nuanced, and missionally helpful Statement that hopefully all of us can affirm with enthusiasm.

I can't wait to see what they come up with. I predict that it will be exceptional.

We are stewarding our differences with love

At General Assembly, I attended both of the two gatherings mentioned above.

The first, "concerned about Revoice" gathering was attended primarily by people who voted with the 60% majority to affirm the Nashville Statement as a response to Revoice.

Along with many others in the PCA, I mostly agree with Revoice's goals and objectives. Because of this, I was a philosophical minority in this particular gathering. I attended because I had been warmly invited to do so by Jon Payne, the event organizer. Though I didn't agree with everything that was said up front, and was concerned about some of the things that were said in the same way that others were concerned about Revoice, I never once felt like an alien. Instead, I felt very much at home with brothers. I experienced warm greetings, handshakes, and kind words from attendees and presenters alike.

One of my suspicions was also confirmed at this gathering, namely, that in spite of their differences, the 60% and the 40% also share some important similarities. This includes agreement, as several of the speakers affirmed, that SSA is a uniquely complex concern pastorally. Most people who struggle with SSA do not struggle for short seasons, but for a lifetime. Everyone seems agreed on this, just as we are agreed that every sinful desire, sexual and otherwise, must be mortified daily and placed beneath the mercies and sanctifying grace of Christ.

My name was mentioned once at the event when Ligon Duncan thanked me for introducing him to Revoice co-founder, Stephen Moss. The two are now happy to call each other friends. Later in the Assembly, Ligon also asked me to introduce him to Greg Johnson (the 46-year old pastor I reference above), whose church hosted the first Revoice Conference. in Ligon's words (and I paraphrase), "I would like to meet Greg because I have heard so many great things about him and am eager to get to know him, learn from him, and understand his perspective better."

Later in the week, Ligon and Greg were able to connect and have a warm, brotherly conversation together in which each sought to more deeply understand the other. After that meeting, Ligon told me how impressed he was with Greg as an articulate, biblically serious, brother in Christ.

The second gathering — the one hosted by PCA pastors and elders who mostly sided with the 40% minority — was also filled with warmth. Just like the first gathering, there were no snarky comments made about "those on the other side." There was no bowing up or arching the back or gnashing the teeth or getting snippy or posturing. Instead, there were calls for unity and respect and love, even (and especially)

across lines of difference in our denomination.

Since the Assembly, pastors in the PCA have gone on their social media feeds and blogs, just as I am now — not only to talk about how they feel about Revoice or the Nashville Statement, and not merely to defend their own positions, but also to give voice to people with whom they disagree. Today, I saw a handful of leaders from the 40% share on Facebook several well-articulated, opposing positions from the 60%.

I love this kind of humility and deference, don't you? I think that Jesus does, too.

Our leaders in the PCA are wrestling through some important things, in a spirited way. As we do this, many are becoming less strident and more kind, from almost every angle except for the anxious, angry, juvenile fringes which are becoming increasingly rare. It seems that people are listening to each other and taking each other more seriously than they did in the past.

Spirited debate leads to rich and excellent outcomes

In a healthy family, you're also supposed to air your laundry...all of it. Everyone is supposed to have a voice, and everyone is supposed to listen to others, with the understanding that iron sharpens iron.

The more detailed and lengthy these kinds of discussions are, the more refined we can become in an eventual, and hopefully shared and unified, vocabulary and perspective.

This is how the great, historic statements like the Nicene and Apostles Creeds were formed, as well as the PCA's own Westminster Standards. These creeds and standards did not fall out of the sky, nor were they formed from singular perspectives or insulated echo chambers or in a

nanosecond. The disagreements and debates got heated sometimes, and documents were refined and refined again and again and again over time *through* disagreement and debate, in multiple iterations, until they reached their final and most universally celebrated forms. Hundreds of years later, we are among the grateful beneficiaries.

In closing...

I look forward to what the PCA's committee on sexuality and marriage comes up with. Based on an optimism that far exceeds any pessimism or discouragement I may feel, I am confident that this will be the case.

Although we still have many important things to work through together, and although some significant differences of perspective may remain, I hope that you will also share my optimism and confidence.

Please join me in praying for my beloved tribe, the PCA.

I love these people.

And I'm not going anywhere.

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Dear Thomas,

David Strain

The following article is written in the form of a letter to a young seminarian struggling with same sex attraction. While based on many similar conversations, both Thomas, and the correspondence mentioned here are entirely fictional. This format was chosen in order to frame the discussion within a pastoral setting.

Dear Thomas,

I enjoyed our conversation the other day, and was delighted to receive your letter. I was honored that you felt free to share with me your struggles with same-sex attraction. The issues you raised are indeed worth thinking through carefully. You are quite right to be frustrated when friends in your seminary classes treat the issue only as a juicy controversy into which they can sink their theological teeth. For you, and so many like you, it is a profoundly personal matter demanding pastoral sensitivity and the kind of careful nuance often missing in online forums and classroom debates. No doubt the careless ways some have spoken about your struggle has been deeply wounding, calculated more to signal to their ecclesiastical tribe where they stand than to offer any real help or guidance to those, like you, who are looking for it. For that, Thomas, I am truly sorry. I'm sure you'd agree that navigating faithfully the theological and pastoral complexities involved has never been a more urgent need.

In your letter you suggest three major areas for our discussion, and I am happy to follow your outline. First, there is the question of sexual orientation. We already agree that homosexual sexual behaviors are prohibited by the biblical teaching so we needn't take time on that

here. But how should we think about sexual orientation, since the category itself doesn't line up precisely with biblical categories? Secondly, you were asking about the distinction between temptation and sin. You hear from some that being tempted by homosexual sexual sin isn't sinful in itself. Jesus was tempted and didn't sin, after all. Thirdly, you raise the issue of identity. May a Christian identify himself or herself as a Gay Christian? How should we respond when someone does?

Concerning sexual orientation, you are right to highlight the fact that sexual orientation is a category entirely foreign to the Bible. This doesn't necessarily mean that it should be rejected, of course. But it does mean that we should be careful to define our terms so that we can apply biblical truth where it can shed most light. The *American Psychiatric Association* defines sexual orientation as,

"an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, or both sexes. Sexual orientation also refers to a person's sense of identity based on those attractions, related behaviors, and membership in a community of others who share those attractions."[1]

The APA further argues that we should distinguish sexual orientation from biological sex- which refers to the biological, anatomical, and chromosomal features associated with being male and female; and from gender identity- which refers to the psychological sense of being male or female, and increasingly, other non-binary gender identities. Thus, according to this taxonomy a person can be *biologically* male, *identify* as a female, and have a homosexual or heterosexual or bisexual *sexual orientation*. Some further insist that none of these categories are stable. They are fluid and malleable. As you will immediately appreciate, this raises an enormously complicated array

of pastoral and theological issues, and the consequent confusion that we find in the church at the moment concerning them isn't really surprising.

So, for the sake of brevity, perhaps the way to proceed is for me to set out my convictions on some of these categories. First of all, the Bible is clear that there are only two sexes. Genesis 1:27 says, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." This fundamental binary is non-negotiable. Our biological sex is not plastic. It is a given, and cannot be changed, contemporary assertions to the contrary notwithstanding. Secondly, gender identity- a subject to which we will doubtless need to return- ought to reflect the biological sex God has assigned to us. However, that a person can *feel* like their gender identity and their biological sex do not correlate is, in my view, entirely consistent with the biblical data about the effects of the Fall. This is what theologians sometimes call the noetic effects of sin- the effects of sin on our minds. Paul, in Romans 1:18-32, demonstrates that sin has distorted our thinking towards God, and towards one another, and thus necessarily also with regards to oneself (and you will notice that Paul particularly highlights the sexual implications of those effects in the course of his discussion as clear evidence of sin's debasing power).

But this question of sexual orientation adds another layer of complexity. We readily concede that it is not usually a chosen condition. The suggestion that those who identify as LGBTQI+ merely *decided* to live that way is as crass as it is naive. But if we concede the un-chosen, often unwanted, nature of same-sex attraction, does that mean that sexual orientation is morally neutral? Or is it a negative thing, an aspect of the Fall, an artifact of the curse, though still not itself fully sinful? Or is it in fact part of what it means to bear the image of God, something redeemable, a path of valid Christian discipleship-

even something that will persist into the new heavens and the new earth at the end of the age? All these are positions adopted by some within the current debate.

How shall we find our way through this morass? Since sexual orientation is a question of the way we are wired, let me start by summarizing some of the biblical teaching on the constitution of a human being. Our first parents, Adam and Eve, were made in the image of God in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness (Col. 3:10, Eph. 4:24). There was nothing in them that inclined to sin. There was no bias that made them want sin. Their sin was a freely chosen act of willful rebellion. Since then, however, the human heart has fallen from its native freedom and is averse to righteousness. Given that God made man male and female in his image, commanding them to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1:27, 28), the possibility of procreation is basic to God's original design. Eve was created to be a "helper fit for" Adam (Gen. 2:18). There is a fundamental compatibility between man and woman in God's plan, with the result that, "a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife and they shall become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). In homosexual relationships there is no complementarity, no possibility of procreation, and there can be no one flesh union.

Beyond all doubt, this means that the desire for intercourse with persons of the same sex is not according to the plan and design of God. It is disordered. On this, Thomas, I know we both agree. But is it *sinful*? One answer, provided by the Roman Catholic Church, teaches a doctrine of concupiscence[2] in which the base instincts of Adam's flesh was made with a natural liability to sin. A special grace, sometimes called the *donum superadditum,* was given to him, by which this inherent liability was wholly restrained that he might walk in original righteousness. This grace was lost at the Fall, however, and so

the concupiscence of our nature has free reign. Importantly, in Roman Catholic thought this concupiscence is not itself sin[3], but only becomes sin when consented to by the will. What has been fascinating to me to watch is how far many Protestant Christians in the evangelical tradition, while avoiding much that is confused in the Roman Catholic teaching on this point, nevertheless join them in affirming that the orientation of the heart towards sin (concupiscence) is not sin. Sin, for many contemporary evangelicals, is only culpable when it is assented to by the will. To put it crudely, sin is only sin when we *do* it.

The Reformed have typically agreed that the concupiscence of the flesh, this pre-behavioral liability to sin, is indeed an orientation of our hearts that inclines us to an entire array of wickedness. Nevertheless they differed by asserting that it arises not only from sin, as a mere consequence, *but is itself sin*. We are not just broken. We are bad. The Westminster Confession of Faith, in chapter 6, paragraph 5, speaking of the presence of sin in our lives, puts it this way:

> *"This corruption of nature, during this life, doth remain in those that are regenerated; and although it be, through Christ, pardoned, and mortified; yet both itself, and all the motions thereof, are truly and properly sin."*

The corruption of nature *and all its motions* are "truly and properly sin". Not just "*of* sin", or a *consequence* of sin, or in some way *associated* with sin, but themselves truly and properly sin. Here is the classical Reformed view of the biases of the heart towards that which God condemns. The bias toward sin, we say, *is sin*. As Herman Bavinck put it:

> *"The Reformers further taught that from its very first motion this concupiscence was also sin: it does not first become sin when the will has consented to it, but it is sin in itself, not only as formed,*

> *therefore, but already as unformed."*[4]

In my next letter, Thomas, I will try to address some of the Biblical data as it touches on these points. For now, let me sum up my argument thus far. The scriptures are clear about the binary character of gender. We are made in God's image, male and female. Sexual compatibility and complementarity is fundamental to God's design. There is no way to assert a sexual orientation attracted to a person of the same sex as anything other than an effect of the Fall. This orientation of the heart, we believe is indistinguishable from the concupiscence of nature, so hotly debated at the Reformation. The fact is, that this concupiscence inclines my heart and yours towards all manner of sin, much of which we should freely acknowledge we have not chosen, yet towards which we are nevertheless drawn and attracted. The orientation of the heart that desires sex with a person of the same gender is one species of this larger fallen reality that plagues every human heart. More than that, with the classical Reformed tradition, we believe that the bias of the heart towards sin, even prior to any acts of the will, is sinful and guilty before God, and must be confessed and repented of. It is now almost a cliché in Reformed circles to say it, but it's worth repeating here again: we are not sinners merely because we sin. We sin because we *are* sinners. Sin is a problem that goes all the way to the roots of who we are.

That may, at first, seem hard, Thomas. But let me close with this. When someone comes to me and says that they are struggling with their sexual orientation, or that they self-identify somewhere on the LGBTQI+ spectrum, my theology allows me to say that such a person is neither a hero- as our culture often portrays them- nor a monster- as many in the church have sometimes implied, by their recoil and hostility. Instead, I can say that this troubling experience of un-chosen desires is simply part of our fallen-ness and our sin. I too struggle with

all sorts of un-chosen and unwanted impulses to sin. The orientation of my heart inclines to all sorts of wickedness too, though mine is different to theirs. But the remedy for us both is the same. I must repent, not only of what I want, and do, and say, but of who and what I *am*. I must turn to Christ, die to myself, and find mercy and grace to live in new obedience in Him alone. There is nothing trite or simplistic about that. Doing so will always be hard and slow and lifelong. But this is still the path of godliness.

Thomas, you might well ask if this approach means that a same-sex attracted Christian like you can never be free of guilt of shame? Is it really my counsel to you that you must *always*be confessing and repenting? Is there *no* space to rest, no peace, no place simply to *be*? To this I'd say that indeed we *must*always be confessing and repenting. Together confession and repentance are the lifelong posture of the believing heart, and not merely the work of a moment. We must always be turning from sin and self to the Savior. We must always be grieving for sin and mourning for the ways our hearts run after idols. But this is not a counsel of despair, but of hope. A life of repentance is a life of rest. A life of confession is a life being conformed to the image of Christ. A penitent heart is a heart that has learned to run from all that undermines its peace to the only One who gives peace to us as a free gift (Matt.11:28). When we begin truly to turn from sin, including the sin of same sex attraction, to Jesus, looking into his face, as it were, we see only love and pardon, never dismissal or disdain. And the more we look there, the more eagerly we will want to. It is not repentance that brings shame, but sin. Repentance brings peace.

I look forward to hearing from you again soon, Thomas, as we continue what I hope will be a fruitful conversation on this important topic. In the meantime, remember that as you struggle on, your temptations are

not uncommon or weird (that's what Paul says in 1 Cor. 10:13, isn't it?). Your sin doesn't make you special, any more than mine does me. But where sin abounds grace abounds all the more. There *is* help for the chief of sinners in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and I commend you to Him. Please know that I will be praying for you as you continue to fight the good fight of faith, and I would be glad if you would please remember me in yours as I fight on too.

Your friend,

David

[1]"Sexual Orientation and Homosexuality," http://www.apa.org/topics/lgbt/orientation.aspx, accessed December 17, 2015.

[2]"Although it is proper to each individual, original sin does not have the character of a personal fault in any of Adam's descendants. It is a deprivation of original holiness and justice, but human nature has not been totally corrupted: it is wounded in the natural powers proper to it; subject to ignorance, suffering, and the dominion of death; and inclined to sin—an inclination to evil that is called "concupiscence."*The Catechism of the Catholic Church, Second Edition, 2.7.III, 405,*

(http://ccc.usccb.org/flipbooks/catechism/files/assets/basic-html/page-102.htmlaccessed 9.4.18)

[3]"This concupiscence, which the apostle sometimes calls sin, the holy Synod declares that the Catholic Church has never understood it to be called sin, as being truly and properly sin in those born again, but because it is of sin, and inclines to sin." The Council of Trent, V.I.5, (http://www.thecounciloftrent.com/ch5.htmaccessed 9.4.18)

[4]Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 3: Sin and Salvation in Christ*, John Bolt, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006)98


Print View

Unnecessary Gifts

Wesley Hill

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Despite not having children of my own, I know something firsthand of what it means to place such enormous hope in a child. Three years ago, my beloved friends with whom I share a home, a married couple named Aidan and Melanie, had a baby, and my future is now unimaginable without her in it.

I was there from (almost) the very beginning: my dog, a neurotic and yappy Yorkie mix who sleeps at the foot of my bed, woke me close to 3 a.m. one muggy August night with a clipped, worried bark. When he wouldn't quiet down, I scooped him off the bed and together we went downstairs to look for the cause of his agitation. Before I made it to the second-floor landing, I heard groaning and crying from behind the closed bathroom door. It took me longer than I care to admit, naïve single man and absentminded professor that I am, to put two and two together: Mel was in labor. This was *the* moment!

Just as Aidan finished packing a bag for the hospital, Mel emerged from the bathroom. Within seconds she was doubled over from another contraction, down on all fours at the top of the staircase that led down to the ground floor of the house. My dog, relieved to learn that the strange noises he had heard had a familiar source, barreled toward her, thwarted in his effort to offer a cheering lick by the vet's plastic cone around his neck.

Aidan and Mel were in the car five minutes later and were off, leaving me in an eerily quiet house.

After an hour I got a call from Aidan: Felicity had been born! Had they arrived at the hospital five minutes later, he said, she might have made her entrance in the lobby. I showered hastily and arrived at the hospital, my body glutted with endorphins, my smile involuntary and ineradicable. How to describe the feeling of taking a child in your arms who is not your own, biologically speaking, but whose fragile pink sleeping body feels suddenly like your bulwark against an unknown future and your consolation for the long loneliness?

When I first moved to Pittsburgh to take a new job as a professor of biblical studies at a theological seminary, I knew no one. I had spent the previous several years overseas, in graduate school, studying the history of the New Testament and Christian theology. For a long time, I had thought that I would pursue a vocation of pastoral ministry in a church, but by the end of my Ph.D., I was entertaining an offer to train future pastors, and it seemed, after much prayer and consultation with friends, like an offer I should accept. Academic jobs in my field are hard to come by, and theologians (like many other workers in transient Western societies) often find themselves moving far away from home for the sake of their work. On top of that, I am unmarried and unpartnered, and I wondered, as I unpacked boxes of books and made too many trips to IKEA that first week in Pittsburgh, who the friends in my new place of residence would end up being. My journal entries from those early days in my quiet house speak of loneliness and apprehension about finding people to know and love in my new place of residence.

Within days, I had met Aidan and Melanie. Aidan was one of my students when we first met, and we quickly bonded over our shared interest in theology and the Anglican branch of the Christian church. Within weeks, the three of us were having dinner together at least twice a week. Two years later, after Aidan had graduated and taken a job as an administrator at the

seminary, we were sharing a house. As of last summer, we have a joint mortgage. The tired trope about feeling with certain friends that one has known them one's entire life is apt in this situation: Aidan and Mel have become my family, and when Felicity was born, I became, in some true but mysterious sense, a parent. A few weeks later, I stood in a seaside church, surrounded by our mutual friends and family, and made promises to help nurture Felicity in faith and love. A priest sprinkled water on her head, and in that moment I became her godfather.

I am keenly aware of how strange all this may sound—and, more poignantly, how tenuous it may seem. I could have a spouse of my own, but I've chosen, for a variety of reasons, both religious and personal, a life of celibacy. I've opted out of the nuclear-family dream, but I haven't thereby escaped its allure. As I grow older, I worry about being alone. When it recently became a question again whether Aidan should take a job that would require an international move, I couldn't finish our conversation about it without collapsing into a paroxysm of sobs. Felicity, in addition to feeling like my bulwark, sometimes seems more like a treasure I might one day lose.

Years ago I read a Christian writer's reflection on what it means in a life of faith to surrender the possibility of having children. "The married Christian ultimately *should* trust that his or her survival is guaranteed in the resurrection," says Rodney Clapp, but "the single Christian ultimately *must* trust in the resurrection."

The married, after all, can fall back on the passage of the family name to children, and on being remembered by children. But singles mount the high wire of faith without the net of children and their memory. If singles live on, it will be because there is a resurrection. And if they are remembered, they will be remembered by the family called church.

Yes, all that is still true, I think now. Christians who forgo marriage and parenthood are counting on finding their fulfillment in another world. But what if I can have it both ways? What if God's promised future *and* Felicity together can be the basis of my hope? The resurrection often seems distant and, despite the vividness of the Easter narratives in the Gospels, abstract. But Felicity is right here in my present.

●

The early Christians thought that something shifted with parents and children after Jesus rose from the dead. Prior to the Incarnation, throughout the plotline of the Hebrew Bible, children were the guarantee that the life of Israel would continue. God had once led their ancestor Abraham outside and asked him to observe just how many cold white pinpricks made up the haze in the black sky. "That's how many descendants you will have," the Lord said (Genesis 15:5). Being unmarried or unable to conceive then was, like it is for many today, a trial and a grief, but doubly so. The single and the barren in Israel not only suffered a kind of loneliness but also represented a sort of social and theological aberration: without a way to contribute to the longevity of the community, the childless were on the margins.

Jesus, however, complicated that way of thinking. *The Da Vinci Code* notwithstanding, he chose a life of celibacy for himself and announced that one didn't need to conceive children biologically in order to be a parent. His resurrection spelled the end of death's dominion, which meant, as early Christian thinkers quickly saw, that having children wasn't essential for the perpetuation of the church. With death defeated, one didn't have to rely on a procreative strategy to elude it. The church would grow by evangelism and baptism, not primarily or at least not *necessarily* through sex and child-rearing. According to Stanley Hauerwas, Christians "believe that every Christian in one generation might be called to singleness, yet God will

create the church anew."

This new Christian point of view gradually changed the way believers thought about the children they welcomed into the world. Although the church recommended the immediate baptism of newborn infants and developed its own fascination with genealogies and ecclesiastical dynasties, it has never quite lost its sense that there is now a clear way to appreciate children without pinning all your hope for the future on them. Children, after Christ, are not simply to be seen as links in a generational chain that will preserve the church's family name or guarantee its future flourishing but instead are gratuitous gifts. Hauerwas again: "Christians do not place their hope in their children, but rather their children are a sign of their hope, in spite of the considerable evidence to the contrary, that God has not abandoned this world."

Paradoxically, then, Christianity would say to me that if I *don't* treat Felicity as my guarantee of an unlonely future, if I don't treat her as the source of my resurrection and my joy, then I stand a better chance of being able to recognize that her life itself, apart from anything she will ever achieve or accomplish for me or for anyone else, is sheer grace—something I should rejoice in, the way a child delights in the mysteries of the universe when they discover them for the first time.

●

Whenever I try to write about Felicity, I feel that I never quite escape the temptation to instrumentalize her. To make her the solution to some problem, or the opportunity for me to be taught some lesson. I can write easily about the gifts she brings: the way she runs to the front door when she sees me putting on my shoes and hoisting my backpack onto my shoulder and then stands with her back to it and says to me, scowling but

with a teasing gleam in her eye, "Don't go! I don't want you to go!" To be the recipient of such unabashed longing catches me off guard, makes me realize how lonely I am still, and heals something in me. I can write all day about those things. But how to write about the gift that she *is*?

Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, once said that living a Christian life is practice in perceiving yourself as loved. "The life of the Christian community," Williams says, "has as its rationale—if not invariably its practical reality—the task of teaching us to so order our relations [with one another] that human beings may see themselves as desired, as the occasion of joy." What this implies, I think, is that such a task is never finished, in this life anyway. We are each of us all the time either helping or hindering those we love—and those we don't love for that matter—to see themselves as gifts, as occasions of joy, as desired and loved simply because they are themselves.

It is frighteningly easy, whether on a sci-fi spaceship or in a shared home in Pittsburgh, to spell out what the people in my life—what the children in my life—are *for* in pragmatic, self-enhancing terms. It's far harder, and, no doubt, the work of a lifetime, to rejoice in a child's life itself. To ask nothing more from them than that they be. To receive their life as grace.

●

Last week I returned home from a long trip. Felicity was happy to see me and asked if I would read her a story—"Two stories," she self-corrected, holding up two fingers—before bed. I sat in the rocking chair in her bedroom with her on my lap, while Aidan looked on from where he was sitting on her bed, and I read the stories to her. When I finished, I said that I needed to say goodnight now and go downstairs and finish cleaning the kitchen while Aidan put her to bed. That did not go over well—to put it

mildly. She circled her arms around my abdomen, buried her face in my chest and said, "But I really love you."

Toddlers are fickle, and maybe she did just want another story and knew from long experience how to tug at my heartstrings. But I don't think so. I think she wanted to be with me whether I was reading or not. She wanted my presence, my attention. How can I live in such a way that she feels the same thing in return?

Art credit: Lene Kilde

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This essay appears in the "What are children for?" symposium in issue 20 of The Point.
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No One Is Born in 'The Wrong Body'

Published on September 24, 2019

The idea that all people have an innate "gender identity" recently has been endorsed by many health-care professionals and mainstream medical organizations. This term commonly is defined to mean the "internal, deeply held" sense of whether one is a man or a woman (or, in the case of children, a boy or a girl), both, or neither. It also has become common to claim that this sense of identity may be reliably articulated by children as young as three years old.

While these claims about gender identity did not attract systematic scrutiny at first, they now have become the subject of criticism from a growing

number of scientists, philosophers and health workers. Developmental studies show that young children have only a superficial understanding of sex and gender (at best). For instance, up until age 7, many children often believe that if a boy puts on a dress, he *becomes* a girl. This gives us reason to doubt whether a coherent concept of gender identity exists *at all* in young children. To such extent as any such identity may exist, the concept relies on stereotypes that encourage the conflation of gender with sex.

However, starting at a young age, children do tend to exhibit preferences and behaviors that we associate with *sex* (as distinct from *gender*). For example, male children display more aggressive behavior than female children. In addition, "cross-sex" behavior—or, more accurately, cross-sex stereotypical behavior—often is predictive of later same-sex attraction.

Can all of these findings be integrated? To start, just as sex influences the development of bodies, it also influences brains. There are in-utero differences in hormone exposures (male testosterone surges at eight weeks gestation, for example), and distinct developmental pathways are triggered based on the XX (typically female) or XY (typically male) chromosomal make-up of neurons. The integration of these sex-related and other developmental processes with environmental pressures gives rise to an individual's unique personality and preferences.

It comes as no surprise then that population-based studies have demonstrated sex-related differences in personality and preferences that are independent of social influences. When social influences are weakened (in more egalitarian societies such as the Nordic countries of Europe), the sex-related differences in personality and preferences actually *increase* (the opposite of what one would expect if men and women were wired in an identical fashion). This suggests that as environmental pressures become relaxed, innate sex-specific preferences surface.

A closer look at personality traits shows that when data is analyzed in aggregate, there is a roughly 30% overlap between sexes, as schematized in the accompanying figure. The consequence of this overlap is that adolescent males who fall on the left end of the male (blue "masculine") curve, and adolescent females who fall on the right end of the female (pink "feminine") curve, will exhibit personality traits that diverge from the

majority of other members of their own sex. In fact, due to the overlap of personality traits between males and females, *the personality traits of some females will be more "male-like" than those exhibited by some, or even most males' and vice versa.*

In the case of an adolescent female whose behavior, personality traits and preferences are more "masculine" than most girls *and* most boys, she could be led to incorrectly conclude that she is really a male, born in the wrong body. That child's parents could become confused as well, noticing how "different" their child's behavior is from their own, or from that of their peers. In reality, that child simply exists at the end of a behavioral spectrum, and "sex-atypical" behavior is part of the natural variation exhibited both within and between the sexes. *Personality and behavior do not define one's sex.*

There are approximately 40-million children in the United States between the ages of four and fourteen. The distribution curve above would suggest that roughly four-million of them have personality profiles that are "sex atypical," but which are still part of the natural distribution of personalities within each sex.

The broad, but normal distribution of personality traits also explains studies showing a 28% concordance of transgender identity in twins. Twins have identical chromosomes, and so likely will have similar sex-related behaviors, as well as experience similar environmental influences in regard to those behaviors. Using twin adolescent males as an example: If their behaviors are at the "feminine" end of the male-typical distribution, they could both become confused as to what their behaviors and preferences mean about their sex.

In most cases, the thing that is now called "gender identity" likely is simply

an individual's perception of how their own sex-related and environmentally influenced personality compares to same and opposite sexed people. Put another way, it's a self-assessment of one's stereotypical degree of "masculinity" or "femininity," and it's wrongly being conflated with biological sex. This conflation stems from a cultural failure to understand the broad distribution of personalities and preferences *within* sexes and the overlap *between* sexes.

When a girl reports that she "feels like a boy" or "is a boy," that sentiment may reflect her perception of how her personality and preferences compare to the rest of her peers. If the girl has an autism spectrum condition, she may even perceive "sex-atypical" behavior that does not actually exist, and thereby falsely self-diagnose as male even without experiencing any actual male personality traits.

It should be noted that these scenarios don't apply to all cases of gender dysphoria, as many other triggers are described in the literature. But in most cases, counseling can help gender dysphoric adolescents resolve any trauma or thought processes that have caused them to desire an opposite sexed body.

Historical data suggests that about 0.5% of children develop gender dysphoria—distress caused by a perceived incongruence between one's biological sex and gender presentation. Reinforcing studies in the medical literature show that, as children get older, childhood-onset gender dysphoria resolves (i.e. ends) in most cases. As two authors put it in a 2016 *International Review of Psychiatry* article, "the conclusion from these studies is that childhood GD [gender dysphoria] is strongly associated with a lesbian, gay or bisexual outcome and that for the majority of the children (85.2%; 270 out of 317 [studied individuals]) the gender dysphoric feelings remitted around or after puberty."

Yet instead of offering counseling, medical professionals now are commonly telling children that they may have been "born in the wrong body." This new approach, called "gender affirmation," makes gender dysphoria less likely to resolve, pushing children down the path toward irreversible medical and surgical interventions. If aggressive transition options are pursued early in puberty, the combination of puberty-blocking drugs, followed by cross sex hormones, will result in permanent infertility.

The growing population of transgender-identifying high school students now is estimated to comprise about 2% of all students—a three-fold increase over the baseline 0.5% figure cited above. Many adolescents now are presenting to gender clinics, with some clinics seeing a 10-fold increase in new cases. Many of these adolescents have no history of childhood gender dysphoria. Higher rates of autism-spectrum conditions have been described in many of these adolescents, and the controversial "affirmation model" is being applied to this unstudied cohort as well. Not surprisingly, reports of transition regret, and de-transition, are growing in number.

To summarize, a lack of understanding regarding the distribution of sex-related personality and behavioral differences has led to confusion that impacts children who fall at the extreme tail-ends of the distribution, and who would be statistically more likely to grow up to be gay, lesbian or bisexual adults if allowed to experience uninterrupted puberty. Additionally, telling a child that he or she was born in the wrong body pathologizes "gender non-conforming" behavior and makes gender dysphoria less likely to resolve.

The fact is, *no child is actually born in the wrong body*. Adults should expand their understanding of what normal male and female behavior and preferences look like—which would lead them to appreciate that being male or female comes with a wider range of personalities preferences, and

possibilities than old stereotypes would have us believe.

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Photo by Sharon McCutcheon on Unsplash

How the trans debate entered the classroom

Martha Terry 4 September 2019

A friend recently told me she spent four years of her childhood living as a boy. 'I hated dresses, cut my hair, gelled it and spiked it,' she says. 'From aged eight, I thought I was meant to be a boy. I remember going into a swimming pool changing room in board shorts and the girls shrieking: "It's a boy!"'

It wasn't until my friend hit puberty that she began to feel more comfortable in her gender. By her mid-teens she was living happily as female. Now she's a married mother of three who looks back on her tomboy phase with an air

of amusement. Yet she shudders to imagine what might have happened if she'd been a child going through the same thing today.

Over the past 30 years, our attitudes towards gender and transgenderism have shifted dramatically. A greater acceptance of LGBT equality means that more adults are now living as a gender different to their birth sex. But what approach should we take to children who exhibit so-called 'gender-nonconforming' behaviours? Should we be so ready to accept a child's declaration that they want to live as the opposite gender? And should we grant them access to medical treatments (such as puberty-blocking drugs) which would enable that in the future?

Some think so. In the past few decades, the number of children being referred to specialist gender services has increased dramatically. Referrals to the Tavistock Gender Identity Development Services (GIDS) — the NHS's only gender identity service for children — have jumped 1,000 per cent since 2012 (up to 2,590 this year). Of those referred, nearly half will go on to have medical intervention, which can include puberty blockers which are intended to give them time to mull over their decision. A Dutch study suggests that almost all of those who take blockers progress to hormone treatment, which leads towards surgery at 18.

But is the rise down to a more accepting attitude towards all things transgender, or is something more worrying at play? Over the past year, senior medical professionals have come forward to express their concerns that an over-readiness to recognise young people as transgender could be leading to vulnerable children — and in particular young girls — being wrongly referred for life-changing treatments. They worry that clinicians are wrongly interpreting signs of complex conditions, such as depression and autism, as evidence that a child could be transgender.

In February, Dr Marcus Evans, an NHS psychoanalyst, resigned from his position as governor of the NHS Trust which runs GIDS, warning that too many clinicians were looking for 'quick solutions' to so-called gender-nonconforming children. His resignation followed a report into the service, compiled by the Trust's then staff governor, branding it 'not fit for purpose'. The report stated that 'children's needs are being met in a woeful, inadequate manner and some will live on with the damaging consequences'. It also revealed that many children were being referred from GIDS for medical intervention after just a handful of consultations (in some cases, only a single meeting).

'This is one of the most complicated clinical areas of mental health and clinicians are often put under huge pressure to refer individuals, who believe this will solve their dysphoria, on for medical interventions,' Dr Evans says. 'Adolescence involves biological, psychological and sociological changes, and feelings of anxiety and confusion about their role required by society, and experimentation. I'm not saying no to gender transition, but services should resist the pull towards a quick solution that bypasses thoughtful exploration. How an adolescent feels now may not be how they feel in ten years' time.'

He's not the only practitioner to think so. Professor Carl Heneghan, who heads the Centre for Evidence Based Medicine at Oxford University, has called for a change in tack, stating there is no conclusive data for making an informed decision about the long-term benefits or cost of treatment. Others point out that 80 per cent of the children referred to specialist clinics will abandon intervention and live in their original gender — although not until after they have begun potentially disruptive treatments.

A senior psychoanalyst (like many I contacted, they asked to remain anonymous) told me 'children are being seriously damaged'. 'Gender

dysphoria is being treated like an aesthetic,' he said. 'How can you consent for a 12-year-old? They'll be infertile, on medical treatment for life, and if you cut out a piece of their gut to turn into a vagina, you're not really making them into a woman. There should be a distinction between what someone wants and what is good for them.'

What has gone wrong? Some point to the influence of campaigners pushing a new approach to transgenderism: one based on self-identification (where an individual has the absolute right to decide their gender) and where medical professionals, as well as parents and teachers, are expected to affirm rather than scrutinise a child's decision. The rise of this approach means that practitioners are being discouraged from applying adequate scrutiny to suspected cases of gender dysphoria in children.

Similar concerns are being raised within the education establishment. Last year, Stephanie Davies-Arai, a mother of four and teacher trainer, founded an organisation called Transgender Trend, with the aim of countering the wave of new teaching resources which she says are pushing an oversimplified view of transgender identity. Davies-Arai believes schools are key to helping children with gender dysphoria, but is concerned teachers are being encouraged to cast aside their 'usual professional eye and understanding of child development in a political exploitation of the most vulnerable children'. Her view is that by adopting what she terms a 'trans-affirmative' approach, schools are endorsing the child's confusion about their gender, 'solving' complex developmental issues with an 'identity badge' and setting children on a path towards medical transition.

Davies-Arai highlights one well-circulated pack which advises science teachers labelling the genitals to 'make it clear that most, rather than all, boys have a penis and testicles and most, rather than all, girls have a vulva and vagina'. This, she believes, is evidence that schools are being

encouraged to take an ideological approach to transgender issues, which focuses on the abstract concept of gender identity at the expense of biological differences between the sexes. 'Recognition of biological facts is not bigotry,' she said, adding that the Education Act 1996 requires both views to be given on any controversial political point.

She's concerned, too, about safeguarding. Statutory guidelines advise teachers never to promise confidentiality to a child. Yet some trans resources — and the schools I have spoken to — encourage teachers to uphold a child's confidentiality in all circumstances, including withholding information from their parents. The guidance also advises trans pupils to use the toilets that correspond with their gender identity, and to confront worried pupils about their transphobia. Davies-Arai says this should be a red flag: statutory guidance is for single-sex toilets after the age of eight. Protecting the trans student is paramount too — any approach should be with the awareness that potential side-effects of medical intervention on brain and bone development are not yet known.

What is the correct approach for schools? Evidently an understanding of transgender issues is important for a school to carry out many of its pastoral duties, not least combating bullying and ensuring an inclusive and welcoming environment. It's relevant, too, to a school's mental health procedures: suicidal thoughts are known to be high among young people identifying as transgender (estimates say as high as 41 per cent). So it's more than understandable that more schools are taking a proactive approach. But these policies need to be balanced against those which protect the rights of other students: for example, the use of single-sex toilets and changing facilities.

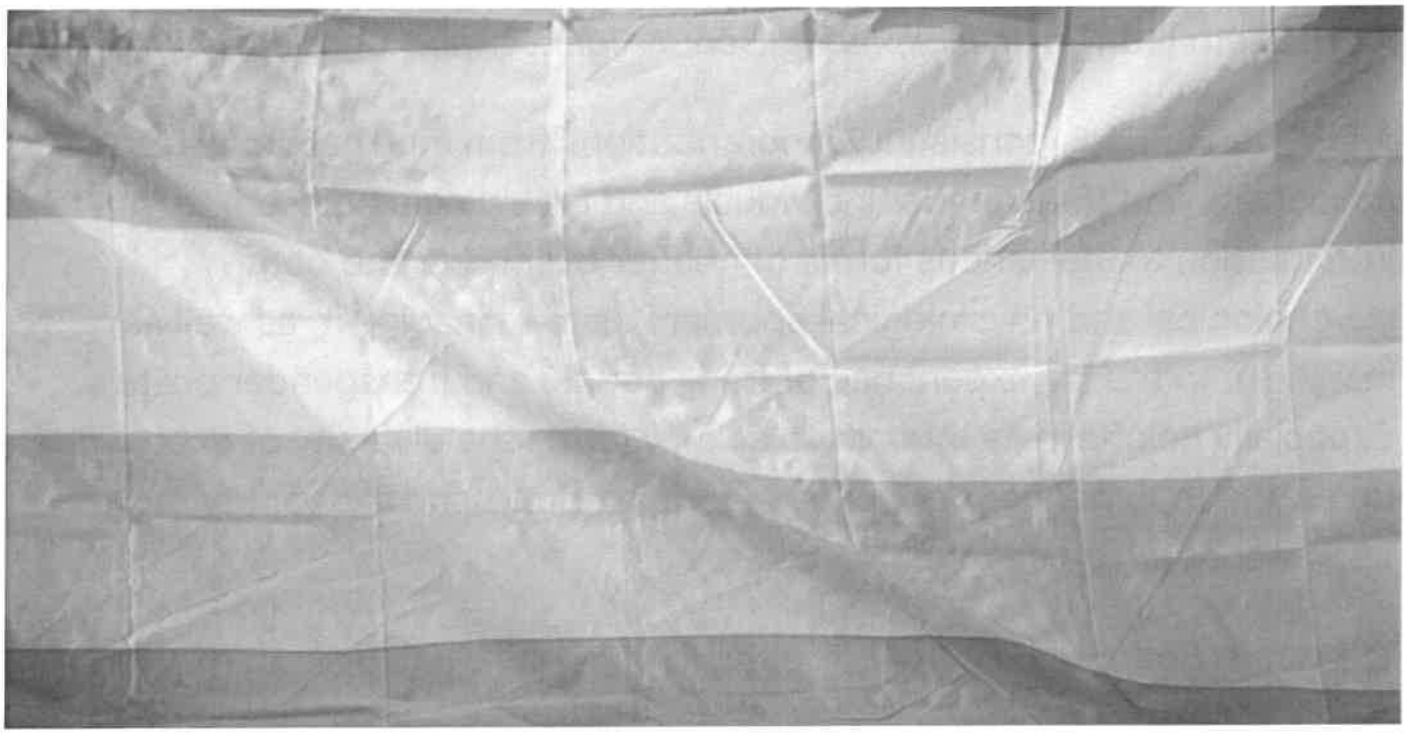
Dr Evans stresses schools need to take time to understand the factors which might influence a child's behaviour. Some 35 per cent of children

referred to GIDS have autism spectrum disorder, many have suffered trauma, or are merely struggling to meet social media ideals of their biological gender. There has been particular concern, for example, that young girls with autism may exhibit stereotypically 'male' interests and be referred to gender services (around 70 per cent of current referrals are girls).

Adolescence is a time when we try on various looks and throw them off again — 80 per cent of childhood gender dysphoria resolves during this phase. A 1,000 per cent increase in six years after decades of static figures is abnormal. And if we hurtle headlong into affirming every Jess who wants to be James largely due to fear of being branded transphobic, we're treating this generation of children as guinea pigs in a dangerous experiment.

Recommended Resources on Transgender

By Andrew Bunt | Friday 9 August 2019



The resources are divided up into several categories, with top recommendations provided for each. I have indicated the level of each resource using the following classifications: Basic (B), Intermediate (I), and Advanced (A). I should note that while I have found all of these resources helpful, I would not necessarily endorse all that they say and/or how they say it.

Understanding Transgender

The first step to responding to any topic well is to understand it properly. With a complex topic like transgender this is not an easy task.

Nicholas Teich, *Transgender 101: A Simple Guide to a Complex Issue* (B)

A basic introduction from a secular writer. Teich introduces the concept of transgender and then looks at topics such as coming out as trans, different forms of transitioning, the history of transgender, discrimination and other types of transgender such as genderqueer and drag queens. Helpful for understanding transgender from a secular perspective.

Az Hakeem (ed.), *Trans: Exploring Gender Identity and Gender Dysphoria* (I)

A fascinating book consisting of contributions from medical professionals, academics and transgender individuals and providing a detailed introduction to the various forms of gender dysphoria and both psychological and physiological approaches to managing it, as well as insights into the life experience of trans people and transgender politics. Especially helpful in its attempt to acknowledge the diversity of experiences under the transgender/gender dysphoria umbrella and the variety of approaches which can then be taken.

Christian Responses

These resources offer a general Christian response to the topic or tackle one of the big practical questions.

Vaughan Roberts, *Transgender* (B)

A very short (80 page) introduction to the topic and the key elements of a Christian response, focusing in on how the Bible's big story should shape our response.

Andrew Walker, *God and the Transgender Debate: What Does the Bible Actually Say About Gender Identity?* (I)

Probably the best popular-level overall treatment of the topic currently available. Walker covers most of the key elements of the conversation

including the right heart response, what the Bible says, how the church should respond and the big practical questions. There is a particularly helpful chapter on talking to children about gender.

Mark Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture* (I)

Yarhouse is a professor of psychology who draws upon his professional experience and understanding in order to help produce a Christian response. This is a helpful resource for understanding gender dysphoria (e.g. symptoms, prevalence, management techniques etc.) While his theological response is helpful, I would not fully endorse all his conclusions. Lectures on the topic by Yarhouse are also easy to find online.

Evangelical Alliance, 'Transformed'

A booklet and videos designed to help the church begin to think about the topic and how Christians should think and respond to it. A helpful (and free!) resource.

Brian Seagraves & Hunter Leavine, *Gender: A Conversation Guide for Parents and Pastors* (B)

As the book itself explains: 'Rather be too early than too late. We obviously want to be age-appropriate with children, but we also need to be proactive, not reactive. The nature of this guide is to help you start the conversation with your children before others do.' Brief (less than 80 pages) but helpful, with chapters focussed on under 7s, 7-11s, and 12s+, as well as basic intros to the key issues and common objections.

Gregory Coles, 'What Pronouns Should Christians Use for Transgender People?' (Pastoral Paper 11 at The Centre for Faith, Sexuality & Gender) (I)

The best, most-thorough Christian response I have found on this key question. Coles makes a compelling case for 'pronoun accommodation' arguing from the nature of how language works.

The Bible and Transgender

Preston Sprinkle, 'A Biblical Conversation About Transgender Identities' (Pastoral Paper 12 at The Centre for Faith, Sexuality & Gender) (I)

A brief paper seeking 'to understand what the Bible says about the categories of male and female as they relate to questions about transgender (and non-binary) identities'. Faithful exegesis, clear line of argument, and all with wonderful Christian compassion.

Robert Smith, 'Responding to the Transgender Revolution' (A)

Smith introduces key terms and explores contemporary gender theory before a thorough biblical and theological exploration concluding with some brief reflections on the practical impact of his findings. While there are places where I would want to use different language, it offers a helpful analysis of cultural thinking and a good theological treatment of the topic.

Evaluations of Affirming Approaches

The dominant view in society (at least by prominence even if not by number of supporters) is that those who experience gender dysphoria and/or who identify as transgender should transition (whether just socially or also medically) to live in line with gender identity. This is a serious enough suggestion that it deserves thorough examination.

Ryan Anderson, *When Harry Became Sally: Responding to the Transgender Moment* (I)

An evaluation of the affirming approach to transgender which draws from research in biology, psychology and philosophy and provides good evidence to question the wisdom of transitioning as the best path for those with gender dysphoria. Includes a helpful chapter on 'Childhood Dysphoria and Desistance'.

Mark Yarhouse & Julia Sadusky, *'A Christian Survey of Sex Reassignment Surgery and Hormone Therapy'* (Pastoral Paper 10 at The Centre for Faith, Sexuality & Gender) (I)

It is hard to find reliable research on the effectiveness of medical interventions designed to alleviate gender dysphoria. This paper does a good job of summarising the current state of research. Yarhouse and Sadusky summarise and evaluate the research which has been published, as well as briefly discussing the experience of detransitioners, trends among teenagers identifying as trans, and alternative management strategies for dysphoria.

The Bigger Cultural Picture

While transgender is a distinct topic to sexuality, much of the underpinning for the secular approach to trans is the same as that for secular views on sexuality and therefore my top recommendations here are the same as those I have previously given on sexuality.

Glynn Harrison, *A Better Story: God, Sex & Human Flourishing* (I)

Harrison analyses the sexual revolution and what underpins modern secular views on sexuality and gender. He reveals the problems with the secular view and presents the better story which Christianity can offer.

Nancy Pearcey, *Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions About Life and*

Sexuality (A)

Love Thy Body exposes and critiques the secular worldview which rejects the body and prioritises the true, inner self. Pearcey includes a chapter on how this worldview is seen in secular views on trans. See a summary here.

Tim Keller on Identity (I)

At Living Out's *Identity in Christ* conference last year, Tim Keller taught on the understanding of identity that often underpins secular understandings of trans and gave a Christian response to this understanding. Incredibly helpful for understanding how things are viewed in our culture and how the gospel offers a better way. You can find session summaries and a link to the videos here.

My New Vagina Won't Make Me Happy

By Nov. 24, 2018

And it shouldn't have to.

Andrea Long Chu at her home in Brooklyn.Kholood Eid for The New York Times

Next Thursday, I will get a vagina. The procedure will last around six hours, and I will be in recovery for at least three months. Until the day I die, my body will regard the vagina as a wound; as a result, it will require regular, painful attention to maintain. This is what I want, but there is no guarantee it will make me happier. In fact, I don't expect it to. That shouldn't disqualify me from getting it.

I like to say that being trans is the second-worst thing that ever happened to me. (The worst was being born a boy.) Dysphoria is notoriously difficult to describe to those who haven't experienced it, like a flavor. Its official definition — the distress some transgender people feel at the incongruence between the gender they express and the gender they've been socially assigned — does little justice to the feeling.

But in my experience, at least: Dysphoria feels like being

unable to get warm, no matter how many layers you put on. It feels like hunger without appetite. It feels like getting on an airplane to fly home, only to realize mid-flight that this is it: You're going to spend the rest of your life on an airplane. It feels like grieving. It feels like having nothing to grieve.

Many conservatives call this crazy. A popular right-wing narrative holds that gender dysphoria is a clinical delusion; hence, feeding that delusion with hormones and surgeries constitutes a violation of medical ethics. Just ask the Heritage Foundation fellow Ryan T. Anderson, whose book "When Harry Became Sally" draws heavily on the work of Dr. Paul McHugh, the psychiatrist who shut down the gender identity clinic at Johns Hopkins in 1979 on the grounds that trans-affirmative care meant "cooperating with a mental illness." Mr. Anderson writes, "We must avoid adding to the pain experienced by people with gender dysphoria, while we present them with alternatives to transitioning."

In this view, it is not only fair to refuse trans people the care

they seek; it is also *kind*. A therapist with a suicidal client does not draw the bath and supply the razor. Take it from my father, a pediatrician, who once remarked to me that he would no sooner prescribe puberty blockers to a gender dysphoric child than he would give a distemper shot to someone who believed she was a dog.

Naturally, a liberal counternarrative exists, and it has become increasingly mainstream. Transgender people are not deluded, advocates say, but they *are* suffering; therefore, medical professionals have a duty to ease that suffering. In this view, dysphoria is more akin to a herniated disc — a source of debilitating but treatable pain. "Gender dysphoria can in large part be alleviated through treatment," states the World Professional Association for Transgender Health in its Standards of Care. Dr. John Steever, an adolescent medicine specialist at the Mount Sinai Center for Transgender Medicine and Surgery in New York City, told The Times last month that a gender-affirming approach seeks to "prevent some of the traditional horrible outcomes that transgender or gender-nonconforming youth have ended up with," including increased rates of depression, suicidal ideation and substance abuse.

A gender-affirmative model will almost certainly lead to more and higher-quality care for transgender patients. But by focusing on minimizing patients' pain, it leaves the door

open for care to be refused when a doctor, or someone playing doctor, deems the risks too high. This was the thrust of a recent Atlantic cover story in which the journalist Jesse Singal used the statistically small number of people who have come to regret their medical transitions to argue that transitioning is "not the answer for everyone." There was a dog whistle here: Hormones and surgery can and should be withheld from patients who want them when such treatments cannot be reasonably expected to "maximize good outcomes."

Mr. Singal is Mr. Anderson's liberal doppelgänger. Both writers engage in what we could call "compassion-mongering," peddling bigotry in the guise of sympathetic concern. Both posit a medical duty to refrain from increasing trans people's suffering — what's called nonmaleficence. Neither has any issue with gatekeeping per se; they differ, modestly, on how the gate is to be kept.

Buried under all of this, like a sober tuber, lies an assumption so sensible you'll think me silly for digging it up. It's this: People transition because they think it will make them feel better. The thing is, this is wrong.

I feel demonstrably worse since I started on hormones. One reason is that, absent the levees of the closet, years of repressed longing for the girlhood I never had have flooded my consciousness. I am a marshland of regret. Another

reason is that I take estrogen — effectively, delayed-release sadness, a little aquamarine pill that more or less guarantees a good weep within six to eight hours.

Like many of my trans friends, I've watched my dysphoria balloon since I began transition. I now feel very strongly about the length of my index fingers — enough that I will sometimes shyly unthread my hand from my girlfriend's as we walk down the street. When she tells me I'm beautiful, I resent it. I've been outside. I know what beautiful looks like. Don't patronize me.

I was not suicidal before hormones. Now I often am.

I won't go through with it, probably. Killing is icky. I tell you this not because I'm cruising for sympathy but to prepare you for what I'm telling you now: I still want this, all of it. I want the tears; I want the pain. Transition doesn't have to make me happy for me to want it. Left to their own devices, people will rarely pursue what makes them feel good in the long term. Desire and happiness are independent agents.

As long as transgender medicine retains the alleviation of pain as its benchmark of success, it will reserve for itself, with a dictator's benevolence, the right to withhold care from those who want it. Transgender people have been forced, for decades, to rely for care on a medical establishment that regards them with both suspicion and

condescension. And yet as things stand today, there is still only one way to obtain hormones and surgery: to pretend that these treatments will make the pain go away.

The medical maxim “First, do no harm” assumes that health care providers possess both the means and the authority to decide what counts as harm. When doctors and patients disagree, the exercise of this prerogative can, itself, be harmful. Nonmaleficence is a principle violated in its very observation. Its true purpose is not to shield patients from injury but to install the medical professional as a little king of someone else’s body.

Let me be clear: I believe that surgeries of all kinds can and do make an enormous difference in the lives of trans people.

But I also believe that surgery’s only prerequisite should be a simple demonstration of want. Beyond this, no amount of pain, anticipated or continuing, justifies its withholding.

Nothing, not even surgery, will grant me the mute simplicity of having always been a woman. I will live with this, or I won’t. That’s fine. The negative passions — grief, self-loathing, shame, regret — are as much a human right as universal health care, or food. There are no good outcomes in transition. There are only people, begging to be taken seriously.

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When Children Say They're Trans

Hormones? Surgery? The choices are fraught—and there are no easy answers.

Jesse Singal

Maciek Jasik

Claire is a 14-year-old girl with short auburn hair and a broad smile. She lives outside Philadelphia with her mother and father, both professional scientists. Claire can come across as an introvert, but she quickly opens up, and what seemed like shyness reveals itself to be quiet self-assuredness. Like many kids her age, she is a bit

overscheduled. During the course of the evening I spent with Claire and her mother, Heather—these aren't their real names—theater, guitar, and track tryouts all came up. We also discussed the fact that, until recently, she wasn't certain she was a girl.

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Sixth grade had been difficult for her. She'd struggled to make friends and experienced both anxiety and depression. "I didn't have any self-confidence at all," she told me. "I thought there was something wrong with me." Claire, who was 12 at the time, also felt uncomfortable in her body in a way she couldn't quite describe. She acknowledged that part of it had to do with puberty, but she felt it was more than the usual preteen woes. "At first, I started eating less," she said, "but that didn't really help."

Around this time, Claire started watching YouTube videos made by transgender young people. She was particularly fascinated by MilesChronicles, the channel of Miles McKenna, a charismatic 22-year-old. His 1 million subscribers have followed along as he came out as a trans boy, went on testosterone, got a double mastectomy, and transformed into a happy, healthy young man. Claire had discovered the videos by accident, or rather by algorithm: They'd showed up in her "recommended" stream. They

gave a name to Claire's discomfort. She began to wonder whether she was transgender, meaning her internal gender identity didn't match the sex she had been assigned at birth. "*Maybe the reason I'm uncomfortable with my body is I'm supposed to be a guy*," she thought at the time.

Claire found in MilesChronicles and similar YouTube videos a clear solution to her unhappiness. "I just wanted to stop feeling bad, so I was like, *I should just transition*," she said. In Claire's case, the first step would be gaining access to drugs that would halt puberty; next, she would start taking testosterone to develop male secondary sex characteristics. "I thought that that was what made you feel better," she told me.

In Claire's mind, the plan was concrete, though neither Heather nor her husband, Mike, knew about any of it. Claire initially kept her feelings from her parents, researching steps she could take toward transitioning that wouldn't require medical interventions, or her parents' approval. She looked into ways to make her voice sound deeper and into binders to hide her breasts. But one day in August 2016, Mike asked her why she'd seemed so sad lately. She explained to him that she thought she was a boy.

This began what Heather recalls as a complicated time in her and her husband's relationship with their daughter. They told Claire that they loved and supported her; they thanked

her for telling them what she was feeling. But they stopped short of encouraging her to transition. “We let her completely explore this on her own,” Heather told me.

To Claire’s parents, her anguish seemed to come out of nowhere. Her childhood had been free of gender dysphoria—the clinical term for experiencing a powerful sense of disconnection from your assigned sex. They were concerned that what their daughter had self-diagnosed as dysphoria was simply the travails of puberty.

As Claire passed into her teen years, she continued to struggle with mental-health problems. Her parents found her a therapist, and while that therapist worked on Claire’s depression and anxiety—she was waking up several times a night to make sure her alarm clock was set correctly—she didn’t feel qualified to help her patient with gender dysphoria. The therapist referred the family to some nearby gender-identity clinics that offered transition services for young people.

Claire’s parents were wary of starting that process. Heather, who has a doctorate in pharmacology, had begun researching youth gender dysphoria for herself. She hoped to better understand why Claire was feeling this way and what she and Mike could do to help. Heather concluded that Claire met the clinical criteria for gender dysphoria in the *DSM-5*, the American Psychiatric Association’s diagnostic

manual. Among other indications, her daughter clearly didn't feel like a girl, clearly wanted a boy's body, and was deeply distressed by these feelings. But Heather questioned whether these criteria, or much of the information she found online, told the whole story. "Psychologists know that adolescence is fraught with uncertainty and identity searching, and this isn't even acknowledged," she told me.

Heather said most of the resources she found for parents of a gender-dysphoric child told her that if her daughter said she was trans, she was trans. If her daughter said she needed hormones, Heather's responsibility was to help her get on hormones. The most important thing she could do was *affirm* her daughter, which Heather and Mike interpreted as meaning they should agree with her declarations that she was transgender. Even if they weren't so certain.

As Heather was searching for answers, Claire's belief that she should transition was growing stronger. For months, she had been insistent that she wanted both testosterone and "top surgery"—a double mastectomy. She repeatedly asked her parents to find her doctors who could get her started on a path to physical transition. Heather and Mike bought time by telling her they were looking but hadn't been able to find anyone yet. "We also took her kayaking, played more board

games with her and watched more TV with her, and took other short family trips," Heather recalled. "We also took away her ability to search online but gave her Instagram as a consolation." They told her they realized that she was in pain, but they also felt, based on what they'd learned in their research, that it was possible her feelings about her gender would change over time. They asked her to start keeping a journal, hoping it would help her explore those feelings.

Claire humored her parents, even as her frustration with them mounted. Eventually, though, something shifted. In a journal entry Claire wrote last November, she traced her realization that she wasn't a boy to one key moment. Looking in the mirror at a time when she was trying to present in a very male way—at "my baggy, uncomfortable clothes; my damaged, short hair; and my depressed-looking face"—she found that "it didn't make me feel any better. I was still miserable, and I still hated myself." From there, her distress gradually began to lift. "It was kind of sudden when I thought: *You know, maybe this isn't the right answer—maybe it's something else*," Claire told me. "But it took a while to actually set in that yes, I was definitely a girl."

Claire believes that her feeling that she was a boy stemmed from rigid views of gender roles that she had internalized. "I think I really had it set in stone what a guy was supposed to be like and what a girl was supposed to be like. I thought

that if you didn't follow the stereotypes of a girl, you were a guy, and if you didn't follow the stereotypes of a guy, you were a girl." She hadn't seen herself in the other girls in her middle-school class, who were breaking into cliques and growing more gossipy. As she got a bit older, she found girls who shared her interests, and started to feel at home in her body.

Heather thinks that if she and Mike had heeded the information they found online, Claire would have started a physical transition and regretted it later. These days, Claire is a generally happy teenager whose mental-health issues have improved markedly. She still admires people, like Miles McKenna, who benefited from transitioning. But she's come to realize that's just not who she happens to be.

The number of self-identifying trans people in the United States is on the rise. In June 2016, the Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law estimated that 1.4 million adults in the U.S. identify as transgender, a near-doubling of an estimate from about a decade earlier. As of 2017, according to the institute, about 150,000 teenagers ages 13 to 17 identified as trans. The number of young people seeking clinical services appears to be growing as well. A major clinic in the United Kingdom saw a more than 300 percent increase in new referrals over the past three years. In the U.S., where youth gender clinics are somewhat newer—40

or so are scattered across the country—solid numbers are harder to come by. Anecdotally, though, clinicians are reporting large upticks in new referrals, and waiting lists can stretch to five months or longer.

The current era of gender-identity awareness has undoubtedly made life easier for many young people who feel constricted by the sometimes-oppressive nature of gender expectations. A rich new language has taken root, granting kids who might have felt alone or excluded the words they need to describe their experiences. And the advent of the internet has allowed teenagers, even ones in parts of the country where acceptance of gender nonconformity continues to come far too slowly, to find others like them.

But when it comes to the question of physical interventions, this era has also brought fraught new challenges to many parents. Where is the line between not "feeling like" a girl because society makes it difficult to *be* a girl and needing hormones to alleviate dysphoria that otherwise won't go away? How can parents tell? How can they help their children gain access to the support and medical help they might need, while also keeping in mind that adolescence is, by definition, a time of fevered identity exploration?

Maciek Jasik

There is no shortage of information available for parents trying to navigate this difficult terrain. If you read the bible of medical and psychiatric care for transgender people—the *Standards of Care* issued by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (Wpath)—you'll find an 11-page section called "Assessment and Treatment of Children and Adolescents With Gender Dysphoria." It states that while some teenagers should go on hormones, that decision should be made with deliberation: "Before any physical interventions are considered for adolescents, extensive exploration of psychological, family, and social issues should be undertaken." The American Psychological Association's guidelines sound a similar note, explaining the

benefits of hormones but also noting that "adolescents can become intensely focused on their immediate desires." It goes on: "This intense focus on immediate needs may create challenges in assuring that adolescents are cognitively and emotionally able to make life-altering decisions."

The leading professional organizations offer this guidance. But some clinicians are moving toward a faster process. And other resources, including those produced by major LGBTQ organizations, place the emphasis on acceptance rather than inquiry. The Human Rights Campaign's "Transgender Children & Youth: Understanding the Basics" web page, for example, encourages parents to seek the guidance of a gender specialist. It also asserts that "being transgender is not a phase, and trying to dismiss it as such can be harmful during a time when your child most needs support and validation." Similarly, parents who consult the pages tagged "transgender youth" on glaad's site will find many articles about supporting young people who come out as trans but little about the complicated diagnostic and developmental questions faced by the parents of a gender-exploring child.

HRC, glaad, and like-minded advocacy groups emphasize the acceptance of trans kids for understandable reasons: For far too long, parents, as well as clinicians, denied the possibility that trans kids and teens even existed, let alone

that they should be allowed to transition. Many such organizations are primarily concerned with raising awareness and correcting still-common misconceptions.

A similar motive seems to animate much of the media coverage of transgender young people. Two genres of coverage have emerged. Dating back at least to the 1993 murder of the Nebraska 21-year-old Brandon Teena, which inspired a documentary as well as the film *Boys Don't Cry*, a steady stream of horror stories has centered on bullying, physical assault, and suicide—real risks that transgender and gender-nonconforming (TGNC) young people still face.

More recently, a wave of success stories has appeared. In many of these accounts, kids are lost, confused, and frustrated right up until the moment they are allowed to grow their hair out and adopt a new name, at which point they finally become their true self. Take, for example, a Parents.com article in which a mother, writing pseudonymously, explains that she struggled with her child's gender-identity issues for years, until finally turning to a therapist, who, after a 20-minute evaluation, pronounced the child trans. Suddenly, everything clicked into place. The mother writes: "I looked at the child sitting between my husband and me, the child who was smiling, who appeared so happy, who looked as if someone finally saw him or her the way she or he saw him or herself." In a

National Geographic special issue on gender, the writer Robin Marantz Henig recounts the story of a mother who let her 4-year-old, assigned male at birth, choose a girl's name, start using female pronouns, and attend preschool as a girl. "Almost instantly the gloom lifted," Henig writes.

Accounts of successful transitions can help families envision a happy outcome for a suffering child. And some young people clearly experience something like what these caterpillar-to-butterfly narratives depict. They have persistent, intense gender dysphoria from a very young age, and transitioning alleviates it. "Some kids don't waver" in their gender identity, Nate Sharon, a psychiatrist who oversaw a gender clinic in New Mexico for two and a half years, and who is himself trans, told me when we spoke in 2016. "I'm seeing an 11-year-old who at age 2 went up to his mom and said, 'When am I going to start growing my penis? Where's my penis?' At 2."

But these stories tend to elide the complexities of being a TGNC young person, or the parent of one. Some families will find a series of forking paths, and won't always know which direction is best. Like Claire's parents, they may be convinced that their child is in pain, but also concerned that physical transition is not the solution, at least not for a young person still in the throes of adolescence.

We are still in the earliest stages of understanding how

physical transitioning affects dysphoric young people. While the specifics depend on your child's age, and can vary from case to case, the transition process for a persistently dysphoric child typically looks something like the following. First, allow your child to transition socially: to adopt the pronouns and style of dress of their authentic gender, and to change their name if they wish. As your child approaches adolescence, get them puberty-blocking drugs, because developing the secondary sex characteristics of their assigned sex could exacerbate their gender dysphoria. When they reach their teen years, help them gain access to the cross-sex hormones that will allow them to develop secondary sex characteristics in line with their gender identity. (Until recently, hormones were typically not prescribed until age 16; it's now more common for 15- and 14-year-olds, and sometimes even younger kids, to begin hormone therapy.)

In the United States, avoiding puberty became an option only a little more than a decade ago, so researchers have just begun tracking the kids engaged in this process, and we don't yet have comprehensive data about their long-term outcomes. Most of the data we do have involve kids who socially transitioned at an early age, but who hadn't yet physically transitioned. The information comes from a University of Washington researcher named Kristina Olson. Olson is the founder of the TransYouth Project, which is

following a cohort of about 300 children for 20 years—the longest such longitudinal study based in the U.S. The kids she is tracking appear to be doing well—they don't seem all that different, in terms of their mental health and general happiness, from a control group of cisgender kids (that is, kids who identify with the sex they were assigned at birth).

At the prestigious Center of Expertise on Gender Dysphoria, at Vrije Universiteit University Medical Center, in Amsterdam —often referred to simply as "the Dutch clinic"—an older cohort of kids who went through the puberty-blockers-and-cross-sex-hormones protocol was also found to be doing well: "Gender dysphoria had resolved," according to a study of the group published in 2014 in *Pediatrics*. "Psychological functioning had steadily improved, and well-being was comparable to same-age peers."

These early results, while promising, can tell us only so much. Olson's findings come from a group of trans kids whose parents are relatively wealthy and are active in trans-support communities; they volunteered their children for the study. There are limits to how much we can extrapolate from the Dutch study as well: That group went through a comprehensive diagnostic process prior to transitioning, which included continuous access to mental-health care at a top-tier gender clinic—a process unfortunately not available to every young person who transitions.

Among the issues yet to be addressed by long-term studies are the effects of medications on young people. As Thomas Steensma, a psychologist and researcher at the Dutch clinic and a co-author of that study, explained to me, data about the potential risks of putting young people on puberty blockers are scarce. He would like to see further research into the possible effects of blockers on bone and brain development. (The potential long-term risks of cross-sex hormones aren't well known, but are likely modest, according to Joshua Safer, one of the authors of the Endocrine Society's "Clinical Practice Guideline" for treatment of gender dysphoria.)

Meanwhile, fundamental questions about gender dysphoria remain unanswered. Researchers still don't know what causes it—gender identity is generally viewed as a complicated weave of biological, psychological, and sociocultural factors. In some cases, gender dysphoria may interact with mental-health conditions such as depression and anxiety, but there's little agreement about how or why. Trauma, particularly sexual trauma, can contribute to or exacerbate dysphoria in some patients, but again, no one yet knows exactly why.

To reiterate: For many of the young people in the early studies, transitioning—socially for children, physically for adolescents and young adults—appears to have greatly

alleviated their dysphoria. But it's not the answer for everyone. Some kids are dysphoric from a very young age, but in time become comfortable with their body. Some develop dysphoria around the same time they enter puberty, but their suffering is temporary. Others end up identifying as nonbinary—that is, neither male nor female.

Ignoring the diversity of these experiences and focusing only on those who were effectively "born in the wrong body" could cause harm. That is the argument of a small but vocal group of men and women who have transitioned, only to return to their assigned sex. Many of these so-called detransitioners argue that their dysphoria was caused not by a deep-seated mismatch between their gender identity and their body but rather by mental-health problems, trauma, societal misogyny, or some combination of these and other factors. They say they were nudged toward the physical interventions of hormones or surgery by peer pressure or by clinicians who overlooked other potential explanations for their distress.

Some of these interventions are irreversible. People respond differently to cross-sex hormones, but changes in vocal pitch, body hair, and other physical characteristics, such as the development of breast tissue, can become permanent. Kids who go on puberty blockers and then on cross-sex hormones may not be able to have biological children.

Surgical interventions can sometimes be reversed with further surgeries, but often with disappointing results.

The concerns of the detransitioners are echoed by a number of clinicians who work in this field, most of whom are psychologists and psychiatrists. They very much support so-called affirming care, which entails accepting and exploring a child's statements about their gender identity in a compassionate manner. But they worry that, in an otherwise laudable effort to get TGNC young people the care they need, some members of their field are ignoring the complexity, and fluidity, of gender-identity development in young people. These colleagues are approving teenagers for hormone therapy, or even top surgery, without fully examining their mental health or the social and family influences that could be shaping their nascent sense of their gender identity.

That's too narrow a definition of affirming care, in the view of many leading clinicians. "Affirming care does not privilege any one outcome when it comes to gender identity, but instead aims to allow exploration of gender without judgment and with a clear understanding of the risks, benefits, and alternatives to any choice along the way," Aron Janssen, the clinical director of the Gender and Sexuality Service at Hassenfeld Children's Hospital, in New York, told me. "Many people misinterpret affirming care as proceeding

to social and medical transition in all cases without delay, but the reality is much more complex."

To make sense of this complex reality—and ensure the best outcome for all gender-exploring kids—parents need accurate, nuanced information about what gender dysphoria is and about the many blank spots in our current knowledge. They don't always get it.

For gender-dysphoric people, physical transition can be life enhancing, even lifesaving. While representative long-term data on the well-being of trans adults have yet to emerge, the evidence that does exist—as well as the sheer heft of personal accounts from trans people and from the clinicians who help them transition—is overwhelming. For many if not most unwaveringly gender-dysphoric people, hormones *work*. Surgery *works*. That's reflected in studies that consistently show low regret rates for the least-reversible physical procedures to address gender dysphoria. One 2012 review of past studies, for example, found that sex-reassignment surgery "is an effective treatment for [gender dysphoria] and the only treatment that has been evaluated empirically with large clinical case series." A study on "bottom surgery," or surgery designed to construct a penis or vagina, found that from 1972 to 2015, "only 0.6 percent of transwomen and 0.3 percent of transmen who underwent [these procedures] were identified as experiencing regret."

Those of us who have never suffered from gender dysphoria can have a hard time appreciating what's at stake. Rebecca Kling, an educator at the National Center for Transgender Equality, in Washington, D.C., told me that before she transitioned she felt as if she were constantly carrying around a backpack full of rocks. "That is going to make everything in my life harder, and in many cases is going to make things impossible," she said. "Of course being able to remove that heavy burden has added comfort and stability in my sense of myself and my body." Other trans people have offered similar descriptions of gender dysphoria—a weight, a buzzing, an unavoidable source of rumination and worry. Hormones and surgery grant transgender people profound relief.

Historically, they have been denied access to that relief. Christine Jorgensen, the first American to become widely known for transitioning through hormones and surgery, in the 1950s, had to go to Denmark for her care. The trans historian Genny Beemyn notes that Jorgensen's doctor "received more than 1,100 letters from transsexual people, many of whom sought to be his patients," in the months after Jorgensen was treated. As a result of the requests, "the Danish government banned such procedures for non-citizens. In the United States, many physicians simply dismissed the rapidly growing number of individuals seeking gender-affirming surgeries as being mentally ill."

Today, the situation in the U.S. has improved, but the lack of access to transition services continues to be a problem. Whether trans people in this country can access treatments such as hormones and surgery depends on a variety of factors, ranging from where they live to what their health insurance will cover (if they have any) to their ability to navigate piles of paperwork. Erica Anderson, a trans woman and clinical psychologist who works at the Child and Adolescent Gender Center, at UC San Francisco's Benioff Children's Hospital, had no luck when she tried to get hormones from an endocrinologist in Philadelphia just a decade ago. "Even I, with my education and resources, was denied care and access," she told me. "The endocrinologist simply said, 'I don't do that.' I offered to provide her the guidelines from her own Endocrine Society," Anderson said. "She refused and wouldn't even look me in the eye. No referral or offer to help. She sent me away with nothing, feeling like I was an undesirable."

Many trans people have stories like Anderson's. For this reason, among others, trans communities can be skeptical of those who focus on negative transition outcomes. They have long dealt with "professionals who seem uncomfortable giving trans people the go-ahead to transition at all," Zinnia Jones, a trans woman who runs the website GenderAnalysis, told me in an email. They have also faced "unnecessarily protracted timelines for accessing

care, a lack of understanding or excess skepticism of our identities from clinicians, and so on."

Groups like Wpath, the primary organization for psychologists, psychiatrists, endocrinologists, surgeons, and others who work with TGNC clients, have attempted to reverse this neglect in recent years. A growing number of adult gender clinics follow "informed consent" protocols, built on the philosophy that trans adults, once informed of the potential benefits and risks of medical procedures, have a right to make their own decisions about their body and shouldn't have their need for services questioned by mental-health and medical professionals.

This shift is seen by many trans people and advocates as an important course correction after decades of gatekeeping—aloof professionals telling trans people they couldn't get hormones or surgery, because they weren't *really* trans, or hadn't been living as a trans person long enough, or were too mentally ill.

For gender-questioning children and teens, the landscape is different. A minor's legal guardian almost always has to provide consent prior to a medical procedure, whether it's a tonsillectomy or top surgery. Wpath and other organizations that provide guidance for transitioning young people call for thorough assessments of patients before they start taking blockers or hormones.

This caution comes from the concerns inherent in working with young people. Adolescents change significantly and rapidly; they may view themselves and their place in the world differently at 15 than they did at 12. "You've got the onset of puberty right around the age where they develop the concept of abstract thinking," said Nate Sharon, the New Mexico psychiatrist. "So they may start to conceptualize gender concepts in a much richer, broader manner than previously—and then maybe puberty blockers or cross-sex hormones aren't for them." That was true for Claire: A shift in her understanding of the nature of gender led her to realize that transitioning was not the answer for her.

For younger children, gender identity is an even trickier concept. In one experiment, for example, many 3-to-5-year-olds thought that if a boy put on a dress, he became a girl. Gender clinicians sometimes encounter young children who believe they are, or want to be, another gender because of their dress or play preferences—*I like rough-and-tumble play, so I must be a boy*—but who don't meet the criteria for gender dysphoria.

In the past, therapists and doctors interpreted the fluidity of gender identity among children as license to put gender-bending kids into the "right" box by encouraging—or forcing—them to play with the "right" toys and dress in the

“right” clothes. Until about five years ago, according to one clinician’s estimate, social transition was often frowned upon. For decades, trans-ness was sometimes tolerated in adults as a last-ditch outcome, but in young people it was more often seen as something to be drummed out rather than explored or accepted. So-called reparative therapy has harmed and humiliated trans and gender-nonconforming children. In her book *Gender Born, Gender Made*, Diane Ehrensaft, the director of mental health at UC San Francisco’s Child and Adolescent Gender Center, writes that victims of these practices “become listless or agitated, long for their taken-away favorite toys and clothes, and even literally go into hiding in closets to continue playing with the verboten toys or wearing the forbidden clothes.” Such therapy is now viewed as unethical.

These days, mainstream youth-gender clinicians practice affirming care instead. They listen to their young patients, take their statements about their gender seriously, and often help facilitate social and physical transition. Affirming care has quickly become a professional imperative: Don’t question who your clients are—let them tell you who they are, and accept their identity in a nurturing, encouraging manner.

The affirming approach is far more humane than older ones, but it conflicts, at least a little, with what we know about

gender-identity fluidity in young people. What does it mean to be affirming while acknowledging that kids and teenagers can have an understanding of gender that changes over a short span? What does it mean to be affirming while acknowledging that feelings of gender dysphoria can be exacerbated by mental-health difficulties, trauma, or a combination of the two?

Clinicians are still wrestling with how to define affirming care, and how to balance affirmation and caution when treating adolescents. "I don't want to be a gatekeeper," Dianne Berg, a co-director of the National Center for Gender Spectrum Health, at the University of Minnesota, told me. "But I also worry that in opening the gates, we're going to have more adolescents that don't engage in the reflective work needed in order to make sound decisions, and there might end up being more people when they are older that are like, *Oh, hmm—now I am not sure about this*."

When Max Robinson was 17, getting a double mastectomy made perfect sense to her. In fact, it felt like her only option—like a miraculous, lifesaving procedure. Though she had a woman's body, she was really a man. Surgery would finally offer her a chance to be herself.

I met Max, now 22, in an airy café in the quiet southern-Oregon town where she lives. She was wearing a T-shirt with a flannel button-down over it. On her head, a gray

winter cap; at her feet, a shaggy white service dog. By the time we met, we'd spoken on the phone and exchanged a number of emails, and she had told me her story—one that suggests the complexity of gender-identity development.

Max recalled that as early as age 5, she didn't enjoy being treated like a girl. "I questioned my teachers about why I had to make an angel instead of a Santa for a Christmas craft, or why the girls' bathroom pass had ribbons instead of soccer balls, when I played soccer and knew lots of other girls in our class who loved soccer," she said.

She grew up a happy tomboy—until puberty. "People expect you to grow out of it" at that age, she explained, "and people start getting uncomfortable when you don't." Worse, "the way people treated me started getting increasingly sexualized." She remembered one boy who, when she was 12, kept asking her to pick up his pencil so he could look down her shirt.

"I started dissociating from my body a lot more when I started going through puberty," Max said. Her discomfort grew more internalized—less a frustration with how the world treated women and more a sense that the problem lay in her own body. She came to believe that being a woman was "something I had to control and fix." She had tried various ways of making her discomfort abate—in seventh grade, she vacillated between "dressing like a 12-year-old

boy" and wearing revealing, low-cut outfits, attempts to defy and accede to the demands the world was making of her body. But nothing could banish her feeling that womanhood wasn't for her. She had more bad experiences with men, too: When she was 13, she had sex with an older man she was seeing; at the time, it felt consensual, but she has since realized that a 13-year-old can't consent to sex with an 18-year-old. At 14, she witnessed a friend get molested by an adult man at a church slumber party. Around this time, Max was diagnosed with depression and generalized anxiety disorder.

In ninth grade, Max first encountered the concept of being transgender when she watched an episode of *The Tyra Banks Show* in which Buck Angel, a trans porn star, talked about his transition. It opened up a new world of online gender-identity exploration. She gradually decided that she needed to transition.

Max's parents were skeptical at first but eventually came around, signing her up for sessions with a therapist who specialized in gender-identity issues. She recalled that the specialist was very open to putting her on a track toward transition, though he suggested that her discomfort could have other sources as well. Max, however, was certain that transitioning was the answer. She told me that she "refused to talk about anything other than transition."

When Max was 16, her therapist wrote her a referral to see an endocrinologist who could help her begin the process of physical transition by prescribing male hormones. The endocrinologist was skeptical, Max said. “I think what she was seeing was a lesbian teenager,” not a trans one. At the time, though, Max interpreted the doctor’s reluctance as her “being ignorant, as her trying to hurt me.” Armed with the referral from her therapist, Max got the endocrinologist to prescribe the treatment she sought.

Max started taking testosterone. She experienced some side effects—hot flashes, memory issues—but the hormones also provided real relief. Her plan all along had been to get top surgery, too, and the initially promising effects of the hormones helped persuade her to continue on this path. When she was 17, Max, who was still dealing with major mental-health issues, was scheduled for surgery.

Because Max had parental approval, the surgeon she saw agreed to operate on her despite the fact that she was still a minor. (It’s become more common for surgeons to perform top surgeries on teenagers as young as 16 if they have parental approval. The medical norms are more conservative when it comes to bottom surgeries; Wpath says they should be performed only on adults who have been living in their gender role for at least one year.) Max went into the surgery optimistic. “I was convinced it would

solve a lot of my problems," she said, "and I hadn't accurately named a lot of those problems yet."

Max Robinson went on cross-sex hormones when she was 16 and had a double mastectomy when she was 17. Now 22, she has detransitioned and identifies as a woman. (Chloe Aftel)

Max was initially happy with the results of her physical transformation. Before surgery, she wasn't able to fully pass as male. After surgery, between her newly masculinized chest and the facial hair she was able to grow thanks to the hormones, she felt like she had left behind the sex she had been assigned at birth. "It felt like an accomplishment to be seen the way I wanted to be seen," she told me.

But that feeling didn't last. After her surgery, Max moved from her native California to Portland and threw herself into the trans scene there. It wasn't a happy home. The clarity of identity she was seeking—and that she'd felt, temporarily, after starting hormones and undergoing surgery—never fully set in. Her discomfort didn't go away.

Today, Max identifies as a woman. She believes that she misinterpreted her sexual orientation, as well as the effects of the misogyny and trauma she had experienced as a young person, as being about gender identity. Because of the hormone therapy, she still has facial hair and is frequently mistaken for male as a result, but she has learned to live with this: "My sense of self isn't entirely dependent on how other people see me."

Max is one of what appears to be a growing number of

people who believe they were failed by the therapists and physicians they went to for help with their gender dysphoria. While their individual stories differ, they tend to touch on similar themes. Most began transitioning during adolescence or early adulthood. Many were on hormones for extended periods of time, causing permanent changes to their voice, appearance, or both. Some, like Max, also had surgery.

Many detransitioners feel that during the process leading up to their transition, well-meaning clinicians left unexplored their overlapping mental-health troubles or past traumas. Though Max's therapist had tried to work on other issues with her, Max now believes she was encouraged to rush into physical transition by clinicians operating within a framework that saw it as the only way someone like her could experience relief. Despite the fact that she was a minor for much of the process, she says, her doctors more or less did as she told them.

Over the past couple of years, the detransitioner movement has become more visible. Last fall, Max told her story to *The Economist*'s magazine of culture and ideas, *1843*. Detransitioners who previously blogged pseudonymously, largely on Tumblr, have begun writing under their real names, as well as speaking on camera in YouTube videos.

Cari Stella is the author of a blog called Guide on Raging

Stars. Stella, now 24, socially transitioned at 15, started hormones at 17, got a double mastectomy at 20, and detransitioned at 22. "I'm a real-live 22-year-old woman with a scarred chest and a broken voice and a 5 o'clock shadow because I couldn't face the idea of growing up to be a woman," she said in a video posted in August 2016. "I was not a very emotionally stable teenager," she told me when we spoke. Transitioning offered a "level of control over how I was being perceived."

Carey Callahan is a 36-year-old woman living in Ohio who detransitioned after identifying as trans for four years and spending nine months on male hormones. She previously blogged under the pseudonym Maria Catt, but "came out" in a YouTube video in July 2016. She now serves as something of an older sister to a network of female, mostly younger detransitioners, about 70 of whom she has met in person; she told me she has corresponded online with an additional 300. (The detransitioners who have spoken out thus far are mostly people who were assigned female at birth. Traditionally, most new arrivals at youth gender clinics were assigned male; today, many clinics are reporting that new patients are mostly assigned female. There is no consensus explanation for the change.)

I met Carey in Columbus in March. She told me that her decision to detransition grew out of her experience working

at a trans clinic in San Francisco in 2014 and 2015. “People had said often to me that when you transition, your gender dysphoria gets worse before it gets better,” she told me. “But I saw and knew so many people who were cutting themselves, starving themselves, never leaving their apartments. That made me doubt the narrative that if you make it all the way to medical transition, then it’s probably going to work out well for you.”

Carey Callahan serves as something of an older sister to a group of women who, like her, have detransitioned. (Matt Eich)

Carey said she met people who appeared to be grappling with severe trauma and mental illness, but were fixated on their next transition milestone, convinced *that* was the

moment when they would get better. “I knew a lot of people committed to that narrative who didn’t seem to be doing well,” she recalled. Carey’s time at the clinic made her realize that testosterone hadn’t made *her* feel better in a sustained way either. She detransitioned, moved to Ohio, and is now calling for a more careful approach to treating gender dysphoria than what many detransitioners say they experienced themselves.

In part, that would mean clinicians adhering to guidelines like Wpath’s *Standards of Care*, which are nonbinding. “When I look at what the *SOC* describes, and then I look at my own experience and my friends’ experiences of pursuing hormones and surgery, there’s hardly any overlap between the directives of the *SOC* and the reality of care patients get,” Carey told me. “We didn’t discuss all the implications of medical intervention—psychological, social, physical, sexual, occupational, financial, and legal—which the *SOC* directs the mental-health professional to discuss. What the *SOC* describes and the care people get before getting cleared for hormones and surgery are miles apart.”

Detransitioners, understandably, elicit suspicion from the trans community. Imagine being a trans person who endured a bruising fight to prove to your psychiatrist and endocrinologist that you are trans, in order to gain access to hormones that greatly improve your quality of life, that

relieve suffering. You might view with skepticism—at the very least—a group calling for more gatekeeping. Conservative media outlets, for their part, often seize on detransition narratives to push the idea that being trans is some sort of liberal invention. "How Carey Was Set Free From Transgenderism" was the conservative website LifeSiteNews' disingenuous take on Carey's story.

Video: Reversing a Gender Transition

No one knows how common detransitioning is. A frequently cited statistic—that only 2.2 percent of people who physically transition later regret it—doesn't paint a complete picture. It comes from a study, conducted in Sweden, that examined only those people who had undergone sex-reassignment surgery and legally changed their gender, then applied to change their gender back—a standard that, Carey pointed out, would have excluded her and most of the detransitioners she knows.

It stands to reason that as *any* medical procedure becomes more readily available, a higher number of people will regret having it. Why focus on detransitioners, when no one even knows whether their experiences are all that common? One answer is that clinicians who have logged thousands of hours working with transgender and gender-nonconforming young people are raising the same concerns.

When it comes to helping TGNC young people gain access to physical interventions, few American clinicians possess the bona fides of the psychologist Laura Edwards-Leeper. A decade ago, when she was working at Boston Children's Hospital, she visited the Dutch clinic to learn the puberty-blocking protocol pioneered there. She helped bring that protocol back to Boston, where she worked with the first-ever group of American kids to go through that process.

Today, Edwards-Leeper oversees a collaboration between Pacific University and Oregon's Transgender Clinic, within the nonprofit Legacy Health system. At Pacific, she is training clinical-psychology doctoral students to conduct "readiness assessments" for young people seeking physical-transition services.

In February, I visited one of her classes at Pacific, just outside Portland. For an hour, she let me pepper her students with questions about their experiences as clinicians-in-training in what is essentially a brand-new field. When the subject of detransitioners came up, Edwards-Leeper chimed in. "I've been predicting this for, I don't know, the last five or more years," she said. "I anticipate there being more and more and more, because there are so many youth who are now getting services with very limited mental-health assessment and sometimes no mental-health assessment. It's inevitable, I think."

Laura Edwards-Leeper, a clinician at Pacific University and Oregon's Transgender Clinic. She brought the puberty-blocking transition protocol pioneered by the Dutch to the U.S. (Matt Eich)

Edwards-Leeper believes that comprehensive assessments are crucial to achieving good outcomes for TGNC young people, especially those seeking physical interventions, in part because some kids who think they are trans at one point in time will not feel that way later on. This is a controversial subject in some corners of the trans community. A small group of studies has been interpreted as showing that the majority of children who experience gender dysphoria eventually stop experiencing it and come to identify as cisgender adults. (In these studies, children

who suffer intense dysphoria over an extended period of time, especially into adolescence, are more likely to identify as trans in the long run.)

This so-called desistance research has been attacked on various methodological grounds. The most-credible critiques center on the claim that some kids who were merely gender *nonconforming*—that is, they preferred stereotypically cross-sex activities or styles of dress—but not *dysphoric* may have been counted as desisters because the studies relied on outdated diagnostic criteria, artificially pushing the percentage upward. (The terms *detransition* and *desist* are used in different ways by different people. In this article, I am drawing this distinction: Detransitioners are people who undergo social or physical transitions and later reverse them; desisters are people who stop experiencing gender dysphoria without having fully transitioned socially or physically.)

The desistance rate for accurately diagnosed dysphoric kids is probably lower than some of the contested studies suggest; a small number of merely gender-nonconforming kids may indeed have been wrongly swept into even some of the most recent studies, which didn't use the most up-to-date criteria, from the *DSM-5*. And there remains a paucity of big, rigorous studies that might deliver a more reliable figure.

Within a subset of trans advocacy, however, desistance isn't viewed as a phenomenon we've yet to fully understand and quantify but rather as a myth to be dispelled. Those who raise the subject of desistance are often believed to have nefarious motives—the liberal outlet ThinkProgress, for example, referred to desistance research as "the pernicious junk science stalking trans kids," and a subgenre of articles and blog posts attempts to debunk "the desistance myth." But the evidence that desistance occurs is overwhelming. The American Psychological Association, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the Endocrine Society, and Wpath all recognize that desistance occurs. I didn't speak with a single clinician who believes otherwise. "I've seen it clinically happen," Nate Sharon said. "It's not a myth."

Despite this general agreement, Edwards-Leeper worries that treatment practices are trending toward an interpretation of affirming care that entails nodding along with children and adolescents who say they want physical interventions rather than evaluating whether they are likely to benefit from them.

A decade ago, the opposite was true. "I was constantly having to justify why we should be offering puberty-blocking medication, why we should be supporting these trans youth to get the services they need," Edwards-Leeper

recalled. “People thought this was just crazy, and thought the four-hour evaluations I was doing were, too—how could that possibly be enough to decide whether to go forward with the medical intervention? That was 2007, and now the questions I get are ‘Why do you make people go through any kind of evaluation?’ And ‘Why does mental health need to be involved in this?’ And ‘We should just listen to what the kids say and listen to what the adolescents say and basically just treat them like adults.’ ”

The six trainees on Edwards-Leeper’s Transgender Youth Assessment Team spoke about the myriad ways mental-health issues and social and cultural influences can complicate a child’s conception of gender. “I would say ‘affirming’ isn’t always doing exactly what the kid says they want in the moment,” one said. Another added: “Our role as clinicians isn’t to confirm or disconfirm someone’s gender identity—it’s to help them explore it with a little bit more nuance.” I asked the students whether they had come across the idea that conducting in-depth assessments is insulting or stigmatizing. They all nodded. “Well, they know what reputation I have,” Edwards-Leeper said with a laugh. “I told them about things almost being thrown at me at conferences.”

Those conference troubles signaled to Edwards-Leeper that her field had shifted in ways she found discomfiting. At one

conference a few years ago, she recalled, a co-panelist who was a well-respected clinician in her field said that Edwards-Leeper's comprehensive assessments required kids to "jump through more fiery hoops" and were "retraumatizing." This prompted a standing ovation from the audience, mostly families of TGNC young people. During another panel discussion, at the same conference with the same clinician, but this time geared toward fellow clinicians, the same thing happened: more claims that assessments were traumatizing, more raucous applause.

Edwards-Leeper isn't alone in worrying that the field is straying from its own established best practices. "Under the motivation to be supportive and to be affirming and to be nonstigmatizing, I think the pendulum has swung so far that now we're maybe not looking as critically at the issues as we should be," the National Center for Gender Spectrum Health's Dianne Berg told me. Erica Anderson, the UCSF clinician, expressed similar concerns: "Some of the stories we've heard about detransitioning, I fear, are related to people who hastily embarked on medical interventions and decided that they weren't for them, and didn't thoroughly vet their decision either by themselves or with professional people who could help them."

Even some of the clinicians who have emphasized the need to be deferential to young people acknowledge the

complexities at play here. A psychologist with decades of experience working with TGNC young people, Diane Ehrensaft is perhaps the most frequently quoted youth-gender clinician in the country. She is tireless in her advocacy for trans kids. "It's the children who are now leading us," she told *The Washington Post* recently. She sees this as a positive development: "If you listen to the children, you will discover their gender," she wrote in one article. "It is not for us to tell, but for them to say."

But when I spoke with Ehrensaft at her home in Oakland, she described many situations involving physical interventions in which her work was far more complicated than simply affirming a client's self-diagnosis. "This is what I tell kids all the time, particularly teenagers," she said. "Often they're pushing for fast. I say, 'Look, I'm old, you're young. I go slow, you go fast. We're going to have to work that out.' " Sometimes, she said, she suspects that a kid who wants hormones *right now* is simply reciting something he found on the internet. "It just feels wooden, is the only thing I can say," she told me.

At the end of our interview, Ehrensaft showed me a slide from a talk she was preparing about what it means to be an affirming clinician: "REALITY: WE ARE NEITHER RUBBER STAMPERS NOR PUSHERS; WE ARE FACILITATORS." This isn't so far off from the definition of the clinician's role

expressed by Edwards-Leeper's students.

Competent clinicians do occasionally challenge their clients' conception of their gender identity in order to ensure that they are approaching the subject in a sufficiently sophisticated manner. They want to make sure that a given patient has gender dysphoria, as defined in the *DSM-5*, and that their current gender identity is a consistent part of who they are. If a teenager finds that his dysphoria lessens significantly when he presents himself in a more feminine way or once his overlapping mental-health problems have been treated, he may develop a different view on the necessity of hormones or surgery.

This is not to say that talk therapy can cure serious gender dysphoria. Edwards-Leeper worked to introduce the Dutch protocol of blockers and hormones in the United States precisely because she believes that it alleviates dysphoria in cases where there would otherwise be prolonged suffering. But clinicians like her are also careful, given the upheavals of adolescence and the fluid conception of gender identity among young people, not to assume that because a young person has gender dysphoria, they should automatically go on hormones.

Edwards-Leeper is hoping to promote a concept of affirming care that takes into account the developmental nuances that so often come up in her clinical work. In this

effort, she is joined by Scott Leibowitz, a psychiatrist who treats children and adolescents. He is the medical director of behavioral health for the thrive program at Nationwide Children's Hospital, in Columbus. Leibowitz has a long history of working with and supporting TGNC youth—he served as an expert witness for the Department of Justice in 2016, when President Barack Obama's administration challenged state-level "bathroom bills" that sought to prevent trans people from using the public bathroom associated with their gender identity. Edwards-Leeper and Leibowitz met at Boston Children's, where Leibowitz did his psychiatry fellowship, and the two have been close friends and collaborators ever since.

While it's understandable, for historical reasons, why some people associate comprehensive psychological assessments with denial of access to care, that isn't how Leibowitz and Edwards-Leeper view their approach. Yes, they want to discern whether a patient actually has gender dysphoria. But comprehensive assessments and ongoing mental-health work are also means of ensuring that transitioning—which can be a physically and emotionally taxing process for adolescents even under the best of circumstances—goes smoothly.

Scott Padberg, one of Edwards-Leeper's patients, is a good example of how her comprehensive-assessment process

looks for teenagers with a relatively straightforward history of persistent gender dysphoria and an absence of other factors that might complicate their diagnosis and transition path. I met Scott and his grandmother and legal guardian, Nancy, at a wrap place in Welches, Oregon, not far from where they live. It was a mild February day, so we sat in one of the pine booths outside the restaurant. Mount Hood's massive snowcapped peak loomed nearby.

Scott Padberg, a 16-year-old patient of Laura Edwards-Leeper who went on cross-sex hormones and recently had a double mastectomy (Matt Eich)

Scott, a 16-year-old who radiates calm, explained that despite having been assigned female at birth, he simply never felt like a girl. "I guess I kinda felt different since I felt

conscious of the fact that I was alive," he said. For part of his childhood, that was fine with everyone around him. He was granted all the freedom he needed to express himself in a gender-nonconforming manner, from getting short haircuts to playing with stereotypically male toys like dinosaurs and Transformers. But the freedom didn't last. When he was 7, his mom married a "super Christian guy" who tried to impose femininity on him. "It's really degrading," Scott said, to be forced to wear a dress when you're a trans boy. (Scott's mom divorced her devout husband two years later, and Nancy eventually took custody of Scott.)

Puberty brought bigger problems. Scott started developing breasts and got his period. "Everything just sucked, basically," he said. "I was pretty miserable with it." In 2015, when Scott was 13, Nancy took him to an assessment appointment with Edwards-Leeper. "She asked me about how I felt when I was younger—was I comfortable with my body? What did I tend to like or be interested in?," Scott recalled. He said that getting on testosterone took what felt like a long time. (He was on puberty blockers for about a year.) But he said he understood that Edwards-Leeper was making certain he had considered a range of questions—from how he would feel about possibly not being able to have biological kids to whether he was comfortable with certain hormonal effects, such as a deeper voice. Scott told

Edwards-Leeper that he was pretty certain about what he wanted.

Scott told me that overall, being on testosterone made him feel better, though also a bit more into "adrenaline-junkie stuff" than before. (There had been a recent incident involving Scott taking Nancy's car for a spin despite not yet having his learner's permit.) When I asked him about top surgery, which he was hoping to have early in the spring, he got about as animated as I saw him during our lunch. "Oh, it's going to be so freeing," he said. "I can change in the locker room!" In April I checked in with Nancy, and she said in an email that the surgery had gone well: "He is SO happy not to have to wear a binder!"

Scott's assessment process centered mostly on the basic readiness questions Edwards-Leeper and Leibowitz are convinced should be asked of any young person considering hormones. But his was a relatively clear-cut case: He'd had unwavering gender dysphoria since early childhood, a lack of serious mental-health concerns, and a generally supportive family. For other gender-dysphoric young people, mental-health problems and family dynamics can complicate the transition process, though they are by no means, on their own, an indication that someone shouldn't transition.

I met Orion Foss at a vegetarian café in the Dennison Place

neighborhood of Columbus. Orion is an expressive 18-year-old with big eyes who is where Scott Padberg may be in a couple of years. Orion's gender trajectory was a bit different, though. As a teenager, he identified as a lesbian and became involved in the local LGBTQ scene. He says that in 2014, when he was 14 years old and trans narratives were starting to show up more frequently on social media, he realized he was trans. He was also suffering from severe depression and anxiety at the time, which had led to self-harm issues, as well as what may have been an undiagnosed eating disorder. Orion believed that additional weight went straight to his hips and chest, accentuating his feminine features. At one point, he dipped down to 70 pounds.

A year or so after he realized he was trans, he told his mother, an ob-gyn, who took him to the thrive program at Nationwide, which had recently opened. (Leibowitz didn't work there yet.) Orion met with two clinicians for an eight-hour assessment. He told me he was "definitely intimidated," but if "you want to do something permanent to your body, you have to be absolutely positive that there's no other way of doing it."

At the time, Orion was initially upset that, because he was underage, thrive wouldn't put him on hormones without the consent of both parents (his father had signed off, but his

mother had not). He started sobbing when he found out. But the thrive team made clear that it was going to help him get where he wanted to be. In the meantime, a thrive therapist, Lourdes Hill, would work with Orion to address his anxiety and depression.

Looking back, Orion sees the value of this process. “If I had been put on hormone therapy when I didn’t have my identity settled, and who I was settled, and my emotions settled, it would have been crazy. ’Cause when I did start hormone therapy, hormones shoot your mood all around, and it’s not exactly safe to just shoot hormones into someone that’s not stable.” He ended up seeing Hill for weekly appointments, talking about not only his gender-identity and mental-health issues, but a host of other subjects as well. “She weeded through every possible issue with me that she could get to,” he said. “I’m glad she made me wait. And I’m glad the structure was there so I couldn’t just throw myself into something that probably would have made me worse off.”

Eventually, his mother, who was “very hesitant,” and was refusing to sign the paperwork for him to start hormones, came around. The thrive team helped her come to grips with the fact that the child she had always known as her daughter was going to become her son. “Lourdes was the driving force in that,” Orion told me in a follow-up email. “Spent a lot of time with me and my mother in therapy.”

When he was finally able to begin the hormone treatments, Orion said, he “immediately felt this weight off my shoulders.” His dosage was gradually increased and then, in May 2017, he got a double mastectomy. Orion’s transition has clearly had a profoundly beneficial effect. It’s changed the way he carries himself in the world. Before, “I would sit like this”—he slouched over—“and hide every possible female thing about me.” Now, he said, he can sit up straight. He feels like himself.

Orion Foss worked with the clinicians at Ohio’s THRIVE clinic on his mental health, his mother’s concerns, and, eventually, his transition. (Matt Eich)

Some parents struggle with the challenges of raising a TGNC child, and they can make gender clinicians’ already

complicated jobs that much more complicated. Many, like Orion Foss's mother, have trouble accepting the idea of their child transitioning. She, at least, came around. In other cases, parents not only refuse to help their child receive treatment but physically abuse them or kick them out of the house. (Reliable numbers for trans young people specifically are hard to come by, but LGBTQ youth are 120 percent more likely than their straight or cisgender counterparts to experience a period of homelessness, according to a study by Chapin Hall, a research center at the University of Chicago.)

But progressive-minded parents can sometimes be a problem for their kids as well. Several of the clinicians I spoke with, including Nate Sharon, Laura Edwards-Leeper, and Scott Leibowitz, recounted new patients' arriving at their clinics, their parents having already developed detailed plans for them to transition. "I've actually had patients with parents pressuring me to recommend their kids start hormones," Sharon said.

In these cases, the child might be capably navigating a liminal period of gender exploration; it's the parents who are having trouble not knowing whether their kid is a boy or a girl. As Sharon put it: "Everything's going great, but Mom's like, 'My transgender kid is going to commit suicide as soon as he starts puberty, and we need to start the hormones

now.' And I'm like, 'Actually, your kid's just fine right now. And we want to leave it open to him, for him to decide that.' Don't put that in stone for this kid, you know?"

Suicide is the dark undercurrent of many discussions among parents of TGNC young people. Suicide and suicidal ideation are tragically common in the transgender community. An analysis conducted by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and the Williams Institute, published in 2014, found that 41 percent of trans respondents had attempted suicide; 4.6 percent of the overall U.S. population report having attempted suicide at least once. While the authors note that for methodological reasons 41 percent is likely an overestimate, it still points to a scarily high figure, and other research has consistently shown that trans people have elevated rates of suicidal ideation and suicide relative to cisgender people.

Scott Leibowitz, a psychiatrist who treats children and adolescents in Columbus, Ohio, is a proponent of comprehensive assessments for young people seeking to transition. (Matt Eich)

But the existence of a high suicide rate among trans people—a population facing high instances of homelessness, sexual assault, and discrimination—does not imply that it is common for young people to become suicidal if they aren't granted immediate access to puberty blockers or hormones. Parents and clinicians do need to make fraught decisions fairly quickly in certain situations. When severely dysphoric kids are approaching puberty, for instance, blockers can be a crucial tool to buy time, and sometimes there's a genuine rush to gain access to them, particularly in light of the waiting lists at many gender clinics. But the clinicians I interviewed said they rarely encounter situations

in which immediate access to hormones is the difference between suicide and survival. Leibowitz noted that a relationship with a caring therapist may itself be an important prophylactic against suicidal ideation for TGNC youth: "Often for the first time having a medical or mental-health professional tell them that they are going to take them seriously and really listen to them and hear their story often helps them feel better than they've ever felt."

The conversations parents are having about gender-dysphoric children online aren't always so nuanced, however. In many of these conversations, parents who say they have questions about the pace of their child's transition, or whether gender dysphoria is permanent, are told they are playing games with their child's life. "Would you rather have a live daughter or a dead son?" is a common response to such questions. "This type of narrative takes an already fearful parent and makes them even more afraid, which is hardly the type of mind-set one would want a parent to be in when making a complex lifelong decision for their adolescent," Leibowitz said.

When parents discuss the reasons they question their children's desire to transition, whether in online forums or in response to a journalist's questions, many mention "social contagion." These parents are worried that their kids are influenced by the gender-identity exploration they're seeing

online and perhaps at school or in other social settings, rather than experiencing gender dysphoria.

Many trans advocates find the idea of social contagion silly or even offensive given the bullying, violence, and other abuse this population faces. They also point out that some parents simply might not *want* a trans kid—again, parental skepticism or rejection is a painfully common experience for trans young people. Michelle Forcier, a pediatrician who specializes in youth-gender issues in Rhode Island, said the trans adolescents she works with frequently tell her things like *No one's taking me seriously—my parents think this is a phase or a fad*.

But some anecdotal evidence suggests that social forces *can* play a role in a young person's gender questioning. "I've been seeing this more frequently," Laura Edwards-Leeper wrote in an email. Her young clients talk openly about peer influence, saying things like *Oh, Steve is really trans, but Rachel is just doing it for attention*. Scott Padberg did exactly this when we met for lunch: He said there are kids in his school who claim to be trans but who he believes are not. "They all flaunt it around, like: 'I'm trans, I'm trans, I'm trans,' " he said. "They post it on social media."

I heard a similar story from a quirky 16-year-old theater kid who was going by the nickname Delta when we spoke. She lives outside Portland, Oregon, with her mother and father.

A wave of gender-identity experimentation hit her social circle in 2013. Suddenly, it seemed, no one was cisgender anymore. Delta, who was 13 and homeschooled, soon announced to her parents that she was genderqueer, then nonbinary, and finally trans. Then she told them she wanted to go on testosterone. Her parents were skeptical, both because of the social influence they saw at work and because Delta had anxiety and depression, which they felt could be contributing to her distress. But when her mother, Jenny, sought out information, she found herself in online parenting groups where she was told that if she dragged her feet about Delta's transition, she was potentially endangering her daughter. "Any questioning brought down the hammer on you," she told me.

Delta's parents took her to see Edwards-Leeper. The psychologist didn't question her about being trans or close the door on her *eventually* starting hormones. Rather, she asked Delta a host of detailed questions about her life and mental health and family. Edwards-Leeper advised her to wait until she was a bit older to take steps toward a physical transition—as Delta recalled, she said something like "I acknowledge that you feel a certain way, but I think we should work on other stuff first, and then if you still feel this way later on in life, then I will help you with that."

"Other stuff" mostly meant her problems with anxiety and

depression. Edwards-Leeper told Jenny and Delta that while Delta met the clinical threshold for gender dysphoria, a deliberate approach made the most sense in light of her mental-health issues.

Delta, a patient of Laura Edwards-Leeper who wanted to transition. Edwards-Leeper counseled her to take things slowly and to work on her co-occurring mental-health issues. Her gender dysphoria eventually lifted. (Matt Eich)

“At the time I was not happy that she told me that I should go and deal with mental stuff first,” Delta said, “but I’m glad that she said that, because too many people are so gung ho and just like, ‘You’re trans, just go ahead,’ even if they aren’t—and then they end up making mistakes that they can’t redo.” Delta’s gender dysphoria subsequently dissipated, though it’s unclear why. She started taking antidepressants in December, which seem to be working. I asked Delta whether she thought her mental-health problems and identity questioning were linked. “They definitely were,” she said. “Because once I actually started working on things, I got better and I didn’t want anything to do with gender labels—I was fine with just being me and not being a specific thing.”

It’s imperative to remember that Delta’s is a kind of story that can happen only in a place where trans people are accepted—and where parents, even skeptical ones like Jenny, are open-minded enough to take their kid to a clinician like Edwards-Leeper. In vast swaths of the United States, kids coming out as trans are much more likely to be met with hostility than with enhanced social status or recognition, and their parents are more likely to lack the willingness—or the resources—to find them care. But to deny the possibility of a connection between social influences and gender-identity exploration among adolescents would require ignoring a lot of what we know

about the developing teenage brain—which is more susceptible to peer influence, more impulsive, and less adept at weighing long-term outcomes and consequences than fully developed adult brains—as well as individual stories like Delta's.

Not everyone agrees about the importance of comprehensive assessments for transgender and gender-nonconforming youth. Within the small community of clinicians who work with TGNC young people, some have a reputation for being skeptical about the value of assessments. Johanna Olson-Kennedy, a physician who specializes in pediatric and adolescent medicine at Children's Hospital Los Angeles and who is the medical director of the Center for Transyouth Health and Development, is one of the most sought-out voices on these issues, and has significant differences with Edwards-Leeper and Leibowitz. In "Mental Health Disparities Among Transgender Youth: Rethinking the Role of Professionals," a 2016 *jama Pediatrics* article, she wrote that "establishing a therapeutic relationship entails honesty and a sense of safety that can be compromised if young people believe that what they need and deserve (potentially blockers, hormones, or surgery) can be denied them according to the information they provide to the therapist."

This view is informed by the fact that Olson-Kennedy is not

convinced that mental-health assessments lead to better outcomes. "We don't actually have data on whether psychological assessments lower regret rates," she told me. She believes that therapy can be helpful for many TGNC young people, but she opposes mandating mental-health assessments for all kids seeking to transition. As she put it when we talked, "I don't send someone to a therapist when I'm going to start them on insulin." Of course, gender dysphoria is listed in the *DSM-5*; juvenile diabetes is not.

One recent study co-authored by Olson-Kennedy, published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, showed that her clinic is giving cross-sex hormones to kids as young as 12. This presses against the boundaries of the Endocrine Society's guidelines, which state that while "there may be compelling reasons to initiate sex hormone treatment prior to age 16 years … there is minimal published experience treating prior to 13.5 to 14 years of age."

If you see gender-dysphoric 13- and 14-year-olds not as young people with a condition that may or may not indicate a permanent identity, but as *trans kids*, full stop, it makes sense to want to grant them access to transition resources as quickly as possible. Olson-Kennedy said that the majority of the patients she sees do need that access. She said she sees a small number of patients who desist or later regret transitioning; those patients, in her opinion, shouldn't

dictate the care of others. She would like to see a radical reshaping of care for TGNC young people. "The way that the care has been organized is around assuring the certainty and decreasing the discomfort of the professionals (usually cisgender) who determine if the young people are ready or not," she told me. "And that's a broken model."

How best to support TGNC kids is a whiplash-inducing subject. To understand even just the small set of stories I encountered in my reporting—stories involving relatively privileged white kids with caring, involved families, none of which is necessarily the case for all TGNC young people in the United States—requires keeping several seemingly conflicting claims in mind. Some teenagers, in the years ahead, are going to rush into physically transitioning and may regret it. Other teens will be prevented from accessing hormones and will suffer great anguish as a result. Along the way, a heartbreaking number of trans and gender-nonconforming teens will be bullied and ostracized and will even end their own lives.

Some LGBTQ advocates have called for gender dysphoria to be removed from the *DSM-5*, arguing that its inclusion pathologizes being trans. But gender dysphoria, as science currently understands it, is a painful condition that requires treatment to be alleviated. Given the diversity of outcomes

among kids who experience dysphoria at one time or another, it's hard to imagine a system without a standardized, comprehensive diagnostic protocol, one designed to maximize good outcomes.

Experiencing gender dysphoria isn't the same as experiencing anxiety or depression or psychological ailments, of course. But in certain ways it is similar: As with other psychiatric conditions, some people experience dysphoria more acutely than others; its severity can wax and wane within an individual based on a variety of factors; it is in many cases intimately tied to an individual's social and familial life. For some people, it will pass; for others, it can be resolved without medical interventions; for still others, only the most thorough treatment available will relieve immense suffering. We recognize that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to treating anxiety or depression, and a strong case can be made that the same logic should prevail with gender dysphoria.

Perhaps a first step is to recognize detransitioners and desisters as being on the same "side" as happily transitioned trans people. Members of each of these groups have experienced gender dysphoria at some point, and all have a right to compassionate, comprehensive care, whether or not that includes hormones or surgery. "The detransitioner is probably just as scarred by the system as

the transitioner who didn't have access to transition," Leibowitz told me. The best way to build a system that fails fewer people is to acknowledge the staggering complexity of gender dysphoria—and to acknowledge just how early we are in the process of understanding it.

This article appears in the July/August 2018 print edition with the headline "Your Child Says She's Trans. She Wants Hormones and Surgery. She's 13."

From Homophobia to Anti-Bigotry: How Did Christians Become the New Pariahs?

Published on October 4, 2019

It is a chill February day in London in 2018 and a small demonstration is taking place outside a cinema just off Piccadilly Circus. Wrapped-up warm, the quiet protestors are holding up posters that say "Silenced" in capital letters. Most Londoners trying to get to their bus stops or across to the bars of Soho barely notice them. A passing couple clock that the group is mainly

middle-aged and elderly. One says to the other, "Some kind of UKIP protest I guess." But it is not. The assembled dozens came here to watch a film called *Voices of the Silenced*. But as their placards point out, *Voices of the Silenced* has itself been silenced.

The organizers booked the cinema three months earlier, and say they had complied with all the cinema's rules for private screenings, including sending them the film in advance. But a day before the screening *Pink News*—an online remnant of Britain's gay press—found out about the screening and called for its immediate cancellation. The call was successful. The Vue cinema swerved around any negative publicity by swiftly announcing that it had the right not to honour private hires if the film to be shown was "in direct contradiction" of its "values." The cinema also warned the group who had hired the venue that there might be a "public order" and even "security" threat if the screening was to go ahead.

So on the big night, with exactly 126 people apparently travelling to attend the screening from as far away as the Netherlands, the organizers are scrambling to try to find another venue at which their assembled punters might view the film. Chief among the evening's organizers is Dr Michael Davidson of the Core Issues Trust. Davidson is not a doctor of medicine. He has a doctorate in education, but like some other public figures who use the prefix you feel that Davidson would not be displeased if someone laboured under a misapprehension about the precise nature of his qualifications.

Davidson had come to national attention in Britain six months earlier when he had been invited as a guest on ITV's *Good Morning Britain*, co-hosted by Piers Morgan, to discuss homosexuality and so-called "conversion therapies." Davidson has admitted that he used to be gay himself—or at least had "homosexual experiences." But at some point he decided that it was not for him. He has been married to his wife for 35 years and has two

children. He believes that where he has gone other people can follow, and so through his group he offers counselling on a voluntary basis to other people who would like to move from being gay to becoming a heterosexual like himself who admits that he still gets—though doesn't act on – certain "urges."

When challenged about all this on national television, Davidson calmly and politely makes it clear that he thinks homosexuality is an "aberration" and specifically that it is a learned behaviour. Asked whether it can be unlearned, he claims that it "in some cases is reversible for people who want to make that the trajectory of their lives." Dr Davidson managed to get this out before his main interviewer denounced him to the others present in the studio. "Do you know what we call these people, Dr Michael?" Piers Morgan asked. "We call them horrible little bigots, in the modern world. Just bigoted people who actually talk complete claptrap and are in my view a malevolent and dangerous part of our society. What's the matter with you? How can you think that nobody's born gay and they all get corrupted and they can all be cured? Who are you to say such garbage?"

A relatively unflustered Davidson asked Morgan for evidence that people are born gay, pointing out that neither the American Psychological Association nor the Royal College of Psychiatrists believe that homosexuality is innate and unchangeable. At which point his interviewer ordered him to "stop talking for a moment" and "stop banging on about whacky-backy scientists in America." Morgan then continued to shout at his guest, "Shut up you old bigot," before he brought the whole interview to a close with the words "I've had enough of him. Dr Michael, shut up." And so it finished. ITV had sent a car to a guest's home in the early morning to bring him to a national television studio only for him to be told during his interview to shut up.

Six months after that event and Davidson remains clearly unmoved by that

high-profile brouhaha. Talking on his mobile phone outside the cancelled venue in Piccadilly, he is relieved to be able to tell his audience that he has finally found a venue which would allow him to screen his film. So the assembled men and women head to Westminster's Emmanuel Centre, just around the corner from the Houses of Parliament.

The doors to that venue are tightly shut, but at one side door, if you mention your name and your name is checked off the list, then the entire evening opens up. Indeed, once inside it becomes a rather jolly affair. We are all given a glass of prosecco and a bag of popcorn to take into the screening. One elderly woman comes over and thanks me for coming. "Obviously I know your own background," she adds, and I realize she is not talking about where I was brought up, "as you talk about it often," she adds gnomically. But she explains that this only means she is even more pleased to see me here. It is true that I may be the only out person at this gay-cure film-screening. But I suspect that I am not the only gay in the room.

The film *Voices of the Silenced* itself is less coherent than might have been hoped. The main point (as explained by Davidson himself in the film's opening) is that "Ancient ideologies and modern ideologies are coming together." It is never quite clear how, and the whole thing feels like two different films awkwardly melded together at a late stage in the editing process. The first film is about the ancient world, with very scary apocalyptic images. The second film consists of some very specific testimony from doctors and patients talking about being gay and then not being gay any more. As well as Dr Davidson there is a Dr Stephen Baskerville and an expert from Texas named (I cannot stifle an audible laugh) David Pickup.

So each time there is something in the film on the loss of the Temple in AD 70 and the Arch of Titus, then it cuts to the gays again. Or the ex-gays. We

are told that "the new state orthodoxy celebrates homosexuality." Then, along with a range of "experts"—mainly from the United States—we get the testimonies. What any of these have to do with the Arch of Titus is never fully made clear. Perhaps homosexuality is causing the collapse of this civilization? If so the accusation is never quite made. There is an "ex-lesbian" now married with five children who says that her "vulnerability" resurfaced 10 years ago but that she got help from a ministry. Several witnesses talk of suicidal thoughts, alcohol abuse and "self-centredness." One (called John) mentions that his mother was "a Jewess," which is a word you don't often hear these days. There is a lot of testimony from a handsome 29-year-old German called Marcel. He describes his own tribulations. He says that as a child his mother beat him, naked, in front of his sister and this—it is suggested—may be one of the reasons why he has in the past found himself attracted to men. Some of the interviewees were from families where their parents divorced. Others were not. Several of the interviewees seem to have been very close to their mothers. Others not.

Dr Joseph Nicolosi—one of the stars of the film—offers up the idea that many of his "patients" actually hate their mothers, don't know how to deal with men and thus develop certain fantasies as a result. He suggests that one cure for anyone troubled by homoerotic temptations is that they might consider taking up a healthy pursuit such as "going to a gym." Suggesting, perhaps, that Dr Nicolosi has never been to a gym.

Of course it is easy to snigger at all this, and for some people it would be easy to be outraged too. Yet the human stories are there. John and Lindsay say that they have both suffered from SSA (Same-Sex Attraction) but have been able to tackle it together and are now working together as a very successful heterosexual couple with five children. "It's not just us," Lindsay reassures the viewer. "We know several people [who have also had SSA] who are happily married. It is hard work," she continues, with John sitting

slightly awkwardly beside her. "It's not for the faint-hearted. And I think you have to just push through. Particularly in the present era: all the media and all the cultural pressures to do something else."

Sadder than this couple are the several interviewees who were gay once but now appear here with their faces blacked out. Perhaps it is too charitable to reflect that it wasn't so long ago that this need for blackened-out faces and back-of-head shots would have applied the other way around.

Towards the film's end an Irish pastor sums up a part of the film's point. He explains that he doesn't mind people holding out the view that homosexuality is inherent and unchangeable. He just wants to be allowed to be able to hold his view. As Dr Baskerville reiterates, only one position on this matter appears to be able to be held in academia and the media, and that is "promotion" of homosexuality. "Sexuality is being politicized," we are told in the final moments. And then, after another inexplicable reference to the Ancient Jews, the film ends with the dramatic yet careful line: "It is time to accept difference."

Unsurprisingly this audience gives the film a very warm reception. And then something mortifying happens. Several of the film's interviewees are in the audience and are invited up onstage to receive more applause. Among them is a young British man from the film called Michael. He seems slightly twitchy and nervous and filled with suffering. His forehead is more than usually wrinkled for someone of his age. For various reasons he has already expounded on in the film he doesn't want to live as a gay man and so has put himself on an obviously internally wracking path to try to live as a heterosexual and to become (as Dr Davidson himself has) an ex-gay—perhaps also, in time, with the same pleasures of having a wife and children of his own. The evening finishes with a prayer.

On the Losing Side

On the way home and in the days that followed I wondered about my evening with the voluntary conversion therapists. And I wondered in particular why I was not more bothered by it.
First, it must be said that I do not fear these people—and certainly could not kick up that level of outrage which the gay press has decided to trade in as it loses its purpose. If there is a reason it is because I cannot see that events are going in the direction of the people in the Emmanuel Centre that night. Today, and for the foreseeable future, they are on the losing side.

When they appear on television they are treated with scorn—perhaps too much scorn. They find it hard to make watchable documentaries, and find it even harder to screen them. They are forced to hide away in secret venues, and seem unlikely to be taking anywhere by storm any time soon.

Of course if I was a young gay man growing up in parts of rural America or Britain—even today—I might think differently. Certainly if I had grown up in parts of the American Bible Belt, or had ever lived through (or been threatened with) the forced conversion therapies that went on there—and still go on in parts of the world today—I might look at Michael (Dr) Davidson and his friends in a very different light.

But here, this evening, they are the losers. And aware of the thrill that can occur when the boot is on the other foot, I feel a reluctance to treat them in victory as some of their ideological confrères might have treated me if we had met before, in different circumstances. The manner in which people and movements behave at the point of victory can be the most revealing thing about them. Do you allow arguments that worked for you to work for others? Are reciprocity and tolerance principles or fig-leaves? Do those who have been censored go on to censor others when the ability is in their own

hands? Today the Vue cinema is on one side. A few decades ago they might have been on the other. And *Pink News* and others who celebrate their victory in chasing *Voices of the Silenced* a mile down the road one February night seem very ready to wield such power over a private event. In doing so they contradict the claims made by gay rights activists from the start of the battle for gay equality, which is that it should be no business of anyone else what consenting adults get up to in private. If that goes for the rights of gay groups then surely it ought to apply to the rights of Christian fundamentalists and other groups too.

There are two other things. The first is that in order to fear what was happening that evening you would have to extrapolate from it. You would have to suspect that, when Davidson says he only wants to deal with people who come to him seeking help, this is a mere cover-story. You would have to believe that this is in fact just a front—the first part of a wider plan to turn something voluntary into something compulsory and from something compulsory for some people into something compulsory for all. And that would be to trample all over one of the bases of political tolerance. It would be to award yourself the right not just to come to your own conclusions about people, but to attribute motives to others that you cannot see but which you suspect. Which leads to a question that everybody in genuinely diverse and pluralistic societies must at some point ask: "Do we take other people at face value, or do we try to read behind their words and actions, claim to see into their hearts and there divine the true motives which their speech and actions have not yet revealed?"

If we were to do this in cases like these, then how would we do it? Do we insist that the other party has the darkest possible motives unless they fully satisfy us that their motivations are otherwise? Or do we have to learn some degree of forbearance and take them on trust? Even the responses to that question aren't fixed. They fluctuate depending on date, location,

circumstance and luck. Someone now in their seventies who was put through forced conversion therapy (especially if put through "aversion" therapy) will have more cause to be suspicious than anyone from each of the successively luckier generations that have followed. Warning sirens go off earlier if they were set earlier, or in harsher times.

Perhaps these generational and geographical differences will diminish over time and the flattening effects of social media will make everyone equally sanguine. Or perhaps these tools have the opposite effect, persuading a gay in 2019 Amsterdam that they are permanently at risk of living in 1950s Alabama. Nobody knows. We live in a world in which every fear, threat and hope imaginable is always available to us.

Yet one prerequisite for avoiding perpetual confrontation is an ability to listen to people's words and put some trust in them. True, in borderline cases, when alerted that something strange may be going on, it may be necessary to dig behind the words to ensure that nothing else is happening. But if that has been done and nothing found then the words must be trusted. None of the press which had sought to silence *Voices of the Silenced* had shown that Davidson or his colleagues were forcing unwilling participants to submit to a regime of heterosexual conversion. None had even enquired into what details the film included or how his "counselling" was being done. And so a set of assumptions had been made about his group and words assigned different interpretations because of their speaker. In this calibration "voluntary" meant "forced," "counselling" meant "persecution" and everybody who went to him was irrevocably and unalterably gay.

It is this last assumption which provokes the only big challenge that Davidson and his colleagues present. In *On Liberty*, first published in 1859, John Stuart Mill famously laid out four reasons for why free speech was a

necessity in a free society: the first and second being that a contrary opinion may be true, or true in part, and therefore may require to be heard in order to correct your own erroneous views; the third and fourth being that even if the contrary opinion is in error, the airing of it may help to remind people of a truth and prevent its slippage into an ignorant dogma which may in time—if unchallenged—itself become lost.

Abiding by Mill's principles would appear to be hard for many people today. Harder, indeed, than simply changing dogmas. In recent years the accepted opinion on gay rights in America, Britain and most other Western democracies has shifted unimaginably, and for the better. But it has moved so swiftly that it has also seen the replacement of one dogma with another. A move from a position of moral opprobrium to a position of expressing opprobrium to anyone whose views fall even narrowly outside the remit of the newly adopted position. The problem with this is not just that we are at risk of being unable to hear positions that are wrong, but that we may be preventing ourselves from listening to arguments that may be partially true.

As it happens, confused as their film-making was, and disagreeable though much of their world view might be, Davidson and his colleagues are onto something around the nature of sexual attraction. These are deep and toxic waters. But there is no point in identifying such waters and not plunging into them.

Replacing Dogma With Dogma

When it comes to matters around sexuality a set of presumptions have been adopted which are proving quite as dogmatic as the notions they replaced. In June 2015 the then Conservative Education Secretary declared that homophobic views were evidence of potential "extremism" in school pupils in Britain. Indeed as the BBC reported, Nicky Morgan said that "attacking

core British values or being extremely intolerant of homosexuality were examples of behaviour that could raise the alarm." They were evidence that a pupil might have been being "groomed" by "extremists," and a pupil who said they thought homosexuality "evil" might need to be reported to the police. Of some interest is the fact that in May 2013 Morgan had voted against the law introducing gay marriage into the UK. One year later, in 2014, she said that she now supported gay marriage and would vote for it if it had not already become law. Another year later, in 2015, she was declaring views such as those she herself had held two years earlier as not merely evidence of "extremism" but fundamentally un-British.

In the 1990s Hillary Clinton supported her husband's "defence of marriage act" which sought to prevent gay marriage from becoming possible in the United States. She watched as he backed the policy of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" for gays in the US military, meaning that any gay soldier who told even one other person about their sexuality could immediately be dismissed from the armed forces. As Robert Samuels wrote in the *Washington Post*, "Hillary Clinton had the chance to make gay rights history. She refused." Yet in 2016 when she was campaigning for the Presidency for the second time and the views of wider society had shifted markedly, the LGBT community (as gays had now become) were one of the specific sections of the country whom Clinton claimed to be campaigning especially hard for. It is not unusual for politicians to shift positions. But the speed with which the times changed made for some remarkably sharp changes of position in the political class.

Other people and countries have instituted even swifter and noisier U-turns. Almost immediately after gay marriage became legal in Germany, acceptance of it was made a condition of citizenship in the state of Baden-Württemberg. Yesterday there was one dogma. Now there is another.

It is not just some politicians who must have suffered whiplash in recent

years. Newspapers that were until recently decidedly unpleasant about homosexuals now cover same-sex weddings like any other society news. Columnists who were damning about equal ages of consent only a few years ago now berate people not fully onboard with gay marriage. In 2018 the MSNBC host Joy Reid was publicly shamed and made to apologize after historic comments from a decade earlier were found in which she had been critical of gay marriage—at a time when almost everybody else was unsupportive of gay marriage as well. When change happens so swiftly, there is much making up for lost time to be done, and little pity for those found dragging behind.

Making Everything Gay

And so some individuals, governments and corporations appear to believe that their job is to make up for lost time. They are forcing discussion of gay issues in a manner slightly beyond acceptance and more in the realms of "This will be good for you."

By 2018 the BBC seemed to have decided that items of specifically gay news needed to be not just reported but headlined as major news. One of its top stories of the day on the corporation's website in September that year was that the Olympic diver Tom Daley had felt "inferior" about his sexuality but that this had given him the motivation to become a success. This story was published five years after Daley had come out. He had not been silent about his private life in the interim period. And yet this human interest story was a lead item on the BBC's website just beneath news of an earthquake and tsunami in Indonesia which had killed more than 800 people. One day later and the BBC website had as one of its lead stories the news that a minor reality television star called Ollie Locke had announced that he and his fiancé (Gareth Locke) were going to join their surnames to make themselves the Locke-Lockes after their forthcoming marriage. In

other headline news, the death toll from the Indonesian earthquake had risen significantly overnight.

Perhaps it requires someone who is gay to say this, but there are times when such 'news' reporting doesn't feel like news reporting at all. Rather it seems that some type of message is being sent out either to the public or to people whom the media believe to be in positions of power. This goes beyond "This will be good for you" and nearer to the realm of "See how you like this, bigot." There are days when you wonder how heterosexuals feel about the growing insistence with which gay stories are crow-barred into any and all areas of news.

Take a fairly average day at the *New York Times*. On 16 October 2017 a reader of the International Edition of the paper might decide to take a break from the opinion pages and turn to some richer fare. They might turn to the business pages. There they would find the lead story in the 'Business' section to be 'Gay in Japan and No Longer Invisible.' Perhaps the average reader of the business pages of the *New York Times* had never thought much about the visibility or otherwise of gay people in Japan. So here was their opportunity to learn about something they didn't know. Specifically, about the story of Shunsuke Nakamura who recently used a morning meeting with fellow employees at his insurance company to come out as gay. This in a country where attitudes towards homosexuality have tended to be (as one professor at a Tokyo university is quoted as saying in the piece) "indifference rather than hate." So the *New York Times* had chosen to splash a story over two pages, as their lead Business feature, about how a man had come out in a company with no negative consequences in a country that had no special problem with gays. Ordinarily it would have to be an exceptionally quiet day in the markets for such a story to be the most important story of the day in 'Business.'

Turn one page and the story continues, this time under the headline 'Companies in Japan More Welcoming to Gays.' By which point the casual reader may well have satisfied their interest in the position of gay men in Japanese companies and begun casting their eye guiltily to the opposite page and the 'Culture' section. And what is the lead story and main headline there? 'A Broader Stage for Love.'

The subject matter of this article could be guessed from the half-page accompanying photo of two male ballerinas, their arms and bodies entwined. "Ballet is slower to change than most art forms," the paper informed its readers, continuing excitedly, "but in the span of just two recent weeks, New York City Ballet, one of the world's premier companies, showed two ballets featuring significant same-sex duets."

The cause for this vast splash is a ballet called *The Times Are Racing*, the latest production of which—at New York City Ballet—includes the casting of a man in a role originally created for a woman. The *New York Times* goes on to explain how the hitherto overwhelmingly heterosexual world of ballet was finally "responding to the contemporary world and putting it on the ballet stage." A male choreographer who was involved promised an "exploration of gender-neutrality" in his work in an Instagram post hash-tagged "loveislove," "genderneutral," "equality," "diversity," "beauty," "pride" and "proud." A sole heretical outside choreographer was singled out for criticism for his stated belief that "there are gender roles in traditional ballet" and that while "men and women are of equal value" they have "different tasks." The New York City Ballet's stars—and the *New York Times* —did not agree.

To the amazement of nobody it turned out that several of the male leads in the New York City Ballet are themselves gay, and one of them explained to the *New York Times* how early in rehearsals his dance partner had turned to

him and said, "It's so nice to get to step into a role where I feel I could actually potentially fall in love with the person I'm dancing with, as opposed to pretending to be a prince falling in love with a princess." To which one might say that anyone who feels any tedium enacting scenes in which princes fall in love with princesses may find ballet isn't their medium. But in case this outburst of diversity on the ballet stage is not enough, the story adds more of the five-a-day moral nutrition to the story with the news that this production "explores not only a same-sex relationship but also issues of race." Describing the overall effect of two men dancing together, the choreographer declared that it just "blew her away." "Suddenly, they could just be themselves," the story concludes. At which point the reader of the *New York Times* has the opportunity to read the other main story about 'Culture': a story about how female comics joking about pregnancy and motherhood are finally becoming big.

There is nothing wrong with a newspaper of record deciding to devote its Business and Culture pages as well as much of its opinion and news pages to stories about being gay. But it sometimes feels as though there is something else going on in all this. The use of gay special interest stories for purposes other than those of actual news: perhaps making up for lost time, or perhaps just rubbing things in the faces of those not yet up to speed with the changed mores of the age. Either way something strange and vaguely retributive is in the air.

Of course people change, learn and often shift their positions. Most do so quietly, generally after others have done the heavy lifting. But one problem of changing societal positions so swiftly is that unexplored, even unexploded, issues and arguments are left behind in the wake. When Piers Morgan demanded of his guest, "How can you think that nobody's born gay?" he displays too great a certainty over a question that is still uncertain. And whether or not anyone is born gay, or whether everyone who is gay is

born gay, it does not follow at all that being gay is a one-way street.

Excerpted from *The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race, and Identity* by Douglas Murray, Penguin Press (September 2019), 280 pages.

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Feature photo: Gay rights campaigner Peter Tatchell, holds a protest at the Lambeth Conference in Canterbury, Kent, as Bishops disscuss human sexuality. PA Images / Alamy Photo.

What Christianity Alone Offers Transgender Persons

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A day barely passes without transgender issues hitting the news. It might be a human interest feature about someone transitioning from one sex to another, and how they've been received (or not) by their communities. It might concern the politics of rights for transgender men and women, and which restrooms should be available to them. It might have to do with complex discussions about the causes of and treatments available for transgenderism. But one thing's for sure: This issue isn't going away anytime soon, and we Christians can't afford to avoid it.

Yet many of us will want to. We know we're treading on hugely sensitive ground. We know we're dealing with areas of deeply personal pain for many men and women, and we will be wary of saying things that might add to that pain.

We might not know what we think about some of the political debates raging all around us. We might feel as though we simply don't know enough about transgenderism to say anything with confidence. Try looking up "transgender" in a concordance; you're not likely to get far.

But the gospel is always good news—for everyone. It strikes me that there are two particular insights the gospel can offer that might form the starting point of our response.

1. Unique Understanding

Gender dysphoria, the feeling of profound discomfort with the sex of one's own body, is often hugely painful. For some it's chronic, going back even to early childhood. For many the emotional toll can feel unbearable. No one can deny this pain. And Christians can perhaps uniquely account for it.

Paul gives us a key insight into the world in which we live:

> For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (Rom. 8:20–21)

Creation isn't right. The physical world has been "subjected to futility," to frustration. It doesn't work properly. It's out of joint. It has been subjected to this frustration by God. The Bible's wider narrative explains this. God cursed the ground as a judgment on human sin (Gen. 3:17). In other words, the world isn't right as both a consequence and a demonstration of the fact that we're not right.

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What's true of creation in general is true of our bodies, too. They're part of the physical order that's been subjected to this frustration. We see this frustration in a variety of ways. Some face unremitting health issues; others contend with a whole range of body image struggles; still more experience body dysphoria—feeling as though they're trapped in the wrong kind of body. The fact is, virtually no one has an entirely straightforward relationship with their own body. It's the way of life in this world. And while it true that anyone can see this problem, Christians can uniquely account for it.

The Bible shows us that sin causes profound alienation—first and foremost from God, with other alienations ensuing. We're alienated from one another. And we're alienated from ourselves. What was meant to be whole and integrated—our mind, body, and spirit—is now deeply fractured. We don't feel aligned in ourselves.

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right.

Knowing these things should make us compassionate. While much of the thinking around transgender issues today is flawed, the pain experienced by those with gender dysphoria is all too real. We of all people should appreciate why, for we of all people understand the true depth of what's wrong with this world. Our churches should be the places people feel most safe trying to articulate their own sense of not being right.

2. Unique Hope

But the Bible never ends with diagnosis. As well as offering a uniquely deep understanding, we can point people to a uniquely solid hope. We all experience the curse of the fall in bodily ways. But the answer to the problems in our body—along with the answer to any of our problems—is never going to be found in ourselves. Whatever we might do to our bodies to overcome perceived problems, we'll never be able to fix what truly lies beneath our self-alienation. We can alter our appearance; we can correct much of what we think to be wrong. But we will never find the real freedom we so deeply crave. Nothing we can do to our bodies will help us to feel that we're our true selves—at least not in a lasting way.

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No, the only answer to our experience of brokenness in our bodies is found in the ultimate brokenness of Christ's body. He experienced the ultimate affliction. His was the body most reviled by others. And the ultimate dysphoria ever experienced was when he "who had no sin" was "made sin for us" (2 Cor. 5:21). Talk about being in the wrong flesh. Yet he went through all of that for us. He experienced ultimate brokenness so that we would never have to.

The issue with our bodies turns out to be the issue with every part of us. They manifest brokenness in a way that points to the brokenness within every single one of us. We've turned from God, so nothing is as it should be. The starting place for the Christian faith is recognizing this. "Blessed are the poor in spirit," Jesus told us (Matt. 5:3), not "Blessed are those who think they've got everything pretty much together."

Bodily brokenness of any kind, if we have eyes to see, can point us to the broken body of Christ—and through that brokenness, to the eventual restoration and healing that comes through him. Embracing Christ doesn't guarantee resolution in this life to the bodily brokenness we

experience. But it does give us a sure and confident hope that we will have a perfect relationship with our body in the world to come.

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