

IS HOMOSEXUAL ORIENTATION SINFUL?

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My aim in this article is to ask and answer the question, “Is homosexual orientation sinful?”¹ I realize that even to ask the question raises eyebrows. In fact, I have found that to raise the issue in such terms arouses suspicions of people on both sides of the larger cultural debate over the ethics of homosexuality. On one side, you have those who view sexual orientation as an unchosen, immutable attribute that has no more moral dimension to it than skin or eye color. Same-sex orientation is simply another element of human diversity to be acknowledged and celebrated and certainly not to be subjected to stigmatizing moral opprobrium. For those who hold this view, we might as well be asking, “Is it sinful to have brown hair?” For them, it is offensive even to ask the question. On the other side, you have those who believe that homosexuality is a choice and that even to grant the existence of something called “sexual orientation” is to concede too much to the sexual revolutionaries. On this view, if it is granted that certain people are born with same-sex attractions, no moral culpability can be assigned for acting on those attractions. And for some Christians, the category of sexual orientation would therefore overturn the logic of the Bible’s clear prohibition of same-sex behavior. So even to ask the question “Is same-sex orientation sinful?” raises the hackles of both sides of the debate.

I would also acknowledge the existence of another group who might have a negative response to this question. And perhaps this group is the one that is on the ascent right now in conservative circles of the evangelical movement. Today you will find many evangelicals willing to grant the distinction between same-sex attraction and same-sex behavior. And among those who do is the clear affirmation that Scripture treats same-sex behavior as sinful. But many of them are reluctant to say that same-sex attraction itself is sinful. They are rightly concerned about placing an undue burden of guilt upon chaste Christians who nevertheless continue to experience ongoing same-sex attraction. These dear brothers and sisters struggle faithfully and practice chastity, but they cannot eliminate same-sex attractions that well up within them spontaneously and uninvited. So it is cruel and unusual to call their unchosen and unwanted attractions sinful. To call their attractions sinful while they are otherwise living a life of faithfulness and chastity seems to confuse temptation with sin. It seems to load these brothers and sisters up with burdens too heavy for

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¹ A version of this essay will appear as a chapter in a forthcoming book, Denny Burk and Heath Lambert, *Transforming Homosexuality: How to Live Faithfully with Same-Sex Attraction* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2015).

them to bear. And no one wants to sin against them and fall under the censure that Jesus laid against the Scribes and Pharisees: “And they tie up heavy loads, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger” (Matthew 23:4).

So I understand that the question as I have posed it immediately puts both friends and foes of the gospel on their guard. Nevertheless, it is a question that evangelical Christians cannot dodge. And it is a question that many evangelicals have not yet thought their way through to biblical clarity. As evangelicals, we have not yet spoken with one voice on this issue in large part because we have yet to define our terms. How do we answer the question, “Is homosexual orientation sinful?” It depends in large part on what we mean by *orientation* and what we mean by *sinful*. And it is precisely here that evangelicals are often talking past one another. I am finding that the common terms of the debate—orientation, attraction, desire, or even what it means to be sinful—have different definitions depending on who you talk to. So on the one hand, we stand in great need of defining our terms, and on the other hand, we have a great need to let the Bible’s message illuminate our thinking about these categories.

This article is different from other works on the ethics of homosexuality. I will not be dealing with well-known biblical texts that deal explicitly with homosexuality. I have already dealt with those issues in detail elsewhere.² In the main, I will be assuming the arguments that I have made in those other works and will not belabor their conclusions here. By way of summary, I argue that the entire fabric of biblical theology proceeds from the assumption that sexual activity is to be enjoyed only within marriage defined as the covenant union of one man and one woman. All sexual activity outside of the covenant of marriage is sinful and prohibited by Scripture. Homosexual conduct is by definition contrary to the norm of marriage and is therefore sinful. This truth is taught in many texts, including Lev 18:22, 20:13; Rom 1:26–27; 1 Cor 6:9–11; Eph 5:21–33; and 1 Tim 1:10. But I will not be dealing in detail with any of those texts in this essay.³

The aim of this article is to explore whether the Bible’s teaching about temptation, sin, and desire maps onto the experience of same-sex attraction. What does the Bible have to say about the pre-behavioral components of sexual sin? Can someone feel an attraction for something sinful without the attraction itself becoming sinful? Can a person experience ongoing desire and inclination for sexual sin without those desires and inclinations themselves becoming sinful? There are those who argue that our sexual desires, attractions, and inclinations are of no moral consequence so long as we do not act on them. On this basis, therefore, homosexual

² Denny Burk, *What Is the Meaning of Sex?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013); idem, “Suppressing the Truth in Unrighteousness: Matthew Vines Takes on the NT,” in *God and the Gay Christian? A Response to Matthew Vines* (ed. R. Albert Mohler; Louisville: SBTS, 2014) 43–57; idem, “Why Evangelicals Should Not Heed Brian McLaren: How the NT Requires Evangelicals to Render a Judgment on the Moral Status of Homosexuality,” *Them* 35/2 (2010) 212–26.

³ For a comprehensive account of the Bible’s teaching about homosexuality, see Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001).

orientation and even same-sex sexual attraction are treated as benign elements of the human personality. But is this really what the Bible teaches?

In looking at these issues, we need to understand at the outset that we are not having a discussion about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. Rather, we are discussing an issue with immediate practical and pastoral implications. How we answer these questions has a profound impact on how we invite our gay and lesbian neighbors to come to Christ. Our answer will also define how brothers and sisters with same-sex attraction pursue a faithful walk with Christ. I would also argue that our answer informs how brothers and sisters with opposite-sex attraction should pursue a faithful walk with Christ. The stakes are high, and we need to get this right.

I. DEFINING SINFUL SEXUAL DESIRE

The terms “same-sex attraction” and “sexual orientation” may be modern inventions, but discussions about the pre-behavioral components of our sin are not. Christians have been sorting out what God’s revelation has to say about this question for two millennia. From the earliest centuries of the church until now, Christians have been coming to terms with scriptural teaching on the morality of sexual desire. Biblically speaking, not all sexual desire is evil. But neither is it all good. On what basis can we tell the difference? Looking at the NT, we might focus on any number of terms that fit within the semantic range of “desire.” Louw and Nida’s lexicon includes twenty-one different entries under the semantic domain “Desire Strongly.”⁴ In the history of Christian thought, however, two of these terms have been central to the discussion—ἐπιθυμέω/ἐπιθυμία, which are the Greek verb and noun for “desire.”

1. *A historical perspective.* The centrality of these terms is owed in no small part to Augustine’s magisterial contribution to the doctrine of original sin. A touchstone of that doctrine is a concept that Augustine calls “concupiscence,” a term that derives from the Latin translation of the biblical terms for “desire” mentioned above. Augustine sought not only to account for the sinful deeds that we commit but also for the desire that produces those deeds. He labeled that desire “concupiscence” and sought to explain from Scripture how Christians should think about their own indwelling attraction to sin.

The heretic Pelagius denied that human beings inherit the sin of Adam. Pelagius and his followers held that we are sinful only insofar as we make sinful choices and that we do not inherit a sinful nature from Adam. Augustine famously contended against the error of Pelagianism in favor of a thoroughgoing doctrine of original sin. He argued that every human being ever born (save One) inherits both Adam’s guilt and his sinful nature. That sinful nature consists not merely in sinful deeds, but also in sinful desire and inclination (a.k.a. “concupiscence”). It may be the case that Augustine’s earlier views stopped short of calling concupiscence sin.

⁴ See “Desire Strongly” in Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the NT Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988) 1.290–92.

But his later writings tell a different story as he eventually reaches the conclusion that concupiscence itself is sinful. He concludes that it is not just sinful deeds that are sinful, but it is also the desire that gives birth to those deeds that is sinful.⁵ This principle is true for all sin, but Augustine applies it specifically to sexual sin. Commenting on Rom 7:20, Augustine says that the apostle Paul calls concupiscence sin: “He gives the name of sin, you see, to that from which all sins spring, namely to the lust [concupiscence] of the flesh.”⁶ Likewise, in a sermon that Augustine preached in 419 on Rom 7:15–25, he writes,

This lust [desire/concupiscence] is not, you see—and this is a point you really must listen to above all else: you see, this lust is not some kind of alien nature.... It’s our debility, it’s our vice. It won’t be detached from us and exist somewhere else, but it will be cured and not exist anywhere at all [in the resurrection].⁷

Augustine makes a similar remark in “On Marriage and Concupiscence,” where he argues that fallen desire (a.k.a. “concupiscence”) is sin. He writes, “By a certain manner of speech it is called sin, since it arose from sin, and, when it has the upper hand, produces sin, the guilt of it prevails in the natural man. ... Arising

⁵ Augustine’s thought on the nature of indwelling sin appears to have changed over time, and this change was due in large part to a shift in his interpretation of Romans 7. See, e.g., Eugene TeSelle, “Exploring the Inner Conflict: Augustine’s Sermons on Romans 7 and 8,” in *Augustine: Biblical Exegete* (ed. Frederick Van Fleteren and Joseph C. Schnaubelt; Collectanea Augustiniana; New York: Peter Lang, 2001) 313. Christopher Bounds describes the change this way: “In 395 Augustine acknowledges that a Christian still experiences the lusts of the flesh, but does not sin. At this point in his theology, he defines sin as the consent of the will to obey, or to act according to sinful desire. Simply having sinful desire is not personal sin.... However, by the opening decades of the fifth century, Augustine’s hamartiology expands. He begins to see sinful desire itself as personal sin and in need of the absolution brought about through the Lord’s Prayer. ... While he only sees it as venial sin and not mortal, it is still sin that a Christian must bear until the resurrection of the body. Augustine comes to see sinful desire as sin because it falls short of the perfect love of God and neighbor, which is the ultimate end of the law.” See Christopher T. Bounds, “Augustine’s Interpretation of Romans 7:14–25, His *Ordo Salutis* and His Consistent Belief in a Christian’s Victory over Sin,” *The Asbury Journal* 64/2 (2009) 24.

⁶ In sermon 155, Augustine explains “why concupiscence is called sin” [Concupiscentia cur vocetur peccatum]. He writes, “In qua conclusione demonstravit Apostolus, ad hoc se dixisse quae supra dixerat, *Jam non ego operor illud, sed id quod in me habitat peccatum* (Rom. vii, 25, 20); quia non mente operabatur consentiendo, sed carne concupiscendo. Hoc enim peccati nomine appellat, unde oriuntur cuncta peccata, id est, ex carnali concupiscentia.” Augustine, “SERMO CLV (a) De verbis Apostoli, Rom. viii, 1–11, Nulla ergo condemnatio est nunc his qui sunt in Christo Jesu, etc., Contra Pelagianos (b). Habitus in basilica SS. Martyrum Scillitanorum,” in *Sancti Aurelii Augustini hipponenensis episcopi Opera omnia* (ed. J.-P. Migne; PL 38; Paris: Excudebatur et venit apud J.-P. Migne editorem, 1865) 841. Translation: “In concluding like that, the apostle showed why he said what he had said above: *Now it is no longer I that perform it, but the sin that lives in me* (Rom. 7:20); it was because he wasn’t performing it by consenting with the mind, but by lusting with the flesh. He gives the name of sin, you see, to that from which all sins spring, namely to the lust [concupiscence] of the flesh.” See also Augustine, “Sermon 155: On the Words of the Apostle, Romans 8:1–11: There Is Therefore No Condemnation Now for Those Who Are in Christ Jesus, Etc. Against the Pelagians, Preached in the Basilica of the Holy Scillitan Martyrs,” in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, part III: *Sermons*, vol. 5: *Sermons 148–183* (trans. Edmund Hill; New Rochelle, NY: New City Press, 1992) 155.

⁷ Saint Augustine, “Sermon 151: On the Words of the Apostle, Romans 7:15–25: For It Is Not the Good I Want to That I Do, but the Evil I Do Not Want To, That Is What I Do, Etc.,” in *Sermons 148–183* 42.

from sin, it is, I say, called sin.”⁸ Augustine understands “desire” (concupiscence) to be the key pre-behavioral component of our sin, and that desire accounts for the fallen inclinations that we all continually experience before ever actually choosing to sin.

Augustine’s influence over subsequent Christian reflection on this point cannot be overestimated. Although Augustine sometimes refrained from calling concupiscence sin, his mature reflection on Scripture reveals that he did indeed label it as such. The Roman Catholic tradition, however, reflects the view that concupiscence is not itself sin and that only conscious acts of the will can truly be deemed to be sinful.⁹ This explains why the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* calls homosexual behavior sinful but stops short of calling homosexual desire sinful and instead labels the desire as “objectively disordered.”¹⁰ The Reformed tradition differs sharply from Roman Catholicism on this point and reflects the Augustinian view that both evil desire and evil deeds must be regarded as thoroughly sinful.¹¹ Perhaps the classic expression of this comes from John Calvin, who also acknowledges his explicit appropriation of Augustine on the point:

We hold that there is always sin in the saints, until they are freed from their mortal frame, because depraved concupiscence resides in their flesh, and is at variance with rectitude. Augustine himself does not always refrain from using the name of sin, as when he says, “Paul gives the name of sin to that carnal concupiscence from which all sins arise. This in regard to the saints loses its dominion in this world, and is destroyed in heaven.” In these words he admits that believers, in so far as they are liable to carnal concupiscence, are chargeable with sin.¹²

⁸ Augustine, “On Marriage and Concupiscence,” in *St. Augustin: Anti-Pelagian Writings* (ed. Philip Schaff; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004) 274. Elsewhere in this work, Augustine repeatedly refers to the “evil of concupiscence,” e.g. “On Marriage and Concupiscence” 1.1, 8.7, 9.8.

⁹ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2515) is clear on this point: “Etymologically, ‘concupiscence’ can refer to any intense form of human desire. Christian theology has given it a particular meaning: the movement of the sensitive appetite contrary to the operation of the human reason. The apostle St. Paul identifies it with the rebellion of the ‘flesh’ against the ‘spirit.’ Concupiscence stems from the disobedience of the first sin. It unsettles man’s moral faculties and, without being in itself an offense, inclines man to commit sins.” See Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Revised in Accordance With the Official Latin Text Promulgated by Pope John Paul II* (2d ed.; Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000) 602. Lisa Cahill argues that the Roman Catholic tradition on sexual desire developed more in line with Aquinas than with Augustine. See Lisa Sowle Cahill, “Using Augustine in Contemporary Sexual Ethics: A Response to Gilbert Meilaender,” *JRE* 29/1 (2001) 27.

¹⁰ Sections 2357 and 2358. Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 566.

¹¹ Bavinck’s discussion of the variant trajectories of Roman Catholicism and the Reformed tradition on this point is extremely helpful. See Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3: *Sin and Salvation in Christ* (ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006) 142–44.

¹² See 3.3.10 in John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1 (trans. Henry Beveridge; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 517. See also *Institutes* 2.1.8 on concupiscence: “Those who have said that original sin is ‘concupiscence’ have used an appropriate word, if only it be added—something that most will by no means concede—that whatever is in man, from the understanding to the will, from the soul even to the flesh, has been defiled and crammed with this concupiscence. Or, to put it more briefly, the whole man is of himself nothing but concupiscence.” See John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1 (ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; The Library of Christian Classics 20;

2. *Jesus' perspective.* Augustine certainly has framed this discussion for the ages, but it is not his exposition of ἐπιθυμέω/ἐπιθυμία that is decisive. These particular terms for “desire” are paradigmatic primarily because of Jesus’ use of the verb form in the Sermon on the Mount, where he prohibits not only sinful sexual deeds but also sinful sexual desire. The NASB translation is a typical literal rendering of this text: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’; but I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matt 5:27–28). Some readers observe the purpose construction in Jesus’ words “in order to lust for her.” Because of the purpose clause, they conclude that unintentional desire for adultery is not sin. But this is a false conclusion. Jesus is connecting the seventh commandment to the tenth commandment. And the tenth commandment prohibits not merely *intentional* desire for adultery, but *all* desire for adultery without respect for the voluntary/involuntary nature of the desire. Considering the fact that the Mosaic Law requires sacrifices for unintentional sin, it is not difficult to see that the *chosenness* of a desire does not ultimately determine its sinfulness. The sinfulness of a desire is determined solely by its conformity or lack of conformity to the law of God.

Matthew’s version of Jesus’ saying in 5:27 quotes directly from the Greek version of Exod 20:13 and Deut 5:17, which is simply the seventh commandment’s prohibition on adultery. So when Jesus follows with a word about *looking at a woman to lust for her*, he is specifically addressing the *sex desire* that contemplates adultery.¹³ He is talking about the pre-behavioral component of the sin of adultery. Desire in this sense is a *longing* or a *craving* for sexual sin.

But this begs the questions: What is the difference between a morally benign desire and a lustful desire? Is Jesus saying that every desire for another man’s wife is sinful? Or is he exempting low-level sexual desire while only prohibiting lustful desire? In some ways, these questions are provoked not by the terms that Jesus uses but by the English words we use to translate them.¹⁴ Jesus is using the verb ἐπιθυμέω, which simply means *to desire* something.¹⁵ It denotes the idea of *longing* or *craving* for some object. The term is variously used in biblical literature with either the negative connotation of *lust* or a neutral connotation of *desire*. But the difference

Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 252. See also *Institutes* 2.7.5. Gregg Allison writes, “These versions of evangelical theology dissent from this [Roman Catholic] position, insisting that fallen human nature, which produces the tendency to sin (concupiscence), is an aspect of original sin and thus incurs the wrath of God.” See Gregg R. Allison, *Roman Catholic Theology & Practice: An Evangelical Assessment* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014) 130. See also Barbara Pitkin, “Nothing But Concupiscence: Calvin’s Understanding of Sin and the *Via Augustini*,” *Cablin Theological Journal* 34 (1999) 358.

¹³ R. T. France’s translation is very specific on this point: “Every man who looks at someone else’s wife and wants to have sex with her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” *The Gospel of Matthew* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) 192.

¹⁴ By this, I mean Matthew’s account of Jesus’ words. Matthew’s account is in Greek, but it is widely agreed that Jesus actually spoke Aramaic. Nevertheless, Matthew’s account establishes intertextual connections with the Greek version of the Ten Commandments. I believe that Matthew faithfully represents Jesus’ intention in making these connections.

¹⁵ BDAG confirms that the preponderance of this term’s use in the NT means simply “desire,” not “lust.” See BDAG, s.v. “ἐπιθυμέω” 1: “to have a strong desire to do or secure someth., *desire, long for*.”

between sinful *lust* and benign *desire* does not consist merely in the intensity of the desire—as if low-level sexual desire for another man’s wife is acceptable and high-level sexual desire is not.¹⁶ Nor does the difference reside in whether one remembers choosing to experience the desire—as if choosing to feel sexual desire for another man’s wife is sinful while unchosen sexual desire for another man’s wife is not. The morally significant difference between sinful lust and benign desire is neither the *intensity* of the desire nor our own personal sense of its *chosenness*. In biblical literature in general and indeed in Jesus’ specific use of the term here, the difference is in the object of the desire.¹⁷

For example, Jesus says that “many prophets and righteous men desired (ἐπιθυμέω) to see what you see, and did not see it” (Matt 13:17). The word clearly means “*desire*,” and in this case the desire is a good thing because it is a desire to see the Messianic Kingdom. Likewise, Paul writes that “If any man aspires to the office of overseer, he desires (ἐπιθυμέω) a good work” (1 Tim 3:1). In both cases, the desire is good because the object of the desire is good. Whether the desire is good (as in Matt 13:17 or 1 Tim 3:1) or evil (as in Matt 5:28) depends entirely on what it is a person desires. That is why this single Greek term is rendered “*desire*” in some texts and “*lust*” in others. If you desire something good, then the desire itself is good. If you desire something evil, then the desire itself is evil. Clearly, having sex with another man’s wife is wrong, and so the desire to commit that deed is also wrong. And that is why Jesus prohibits even the desire to commit adultery.

Jesus is not introducing an innovation on this point. It is not as if no one had ever contemplated the moral connection between sinful deeds and the desire that leads to sinful deeds. Indeed, Jesus is simply connecting the Law’s prohibition on adultery in the seventh commandment to the Law’s prohibition on the desire for it in the tenth commandment. The term that Jesus uses for *desire* in Matt 5:28 is taken directly from the Greek version of the tenth commandment, “Thou shalt not *covet* thy neighbor’s wife; thou shalt not *covet* thy neighbor’s house; nor his field, nor his servant, nor his maid, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any of his cattle, nor whatever belongs to thy neighbor” (Exod 20:17; italics mine). What our English translations typically render as *covet* is simply the term for desire that we have been considering—ἐπιθυμέω. Again, our English translations of the tenth commandment render it with a negative connotation because the objects of desire are prohibited.¹⁸ Jesus

¹⁶ The intensity of desire is not an irrelevant moral consideration. An overly intense desire for a good object may indicate the presence of idolatry in the heart. Having said this, the intensity of desire is not the first moral consideration in Jesus’ words in Matt 5:27–28. A low-level desire for an evil object is always an evil desire. The intensity of the desire—no matter how slight—does not change that fundamental moral precept. In Matt 5:27–28, Jesus is not excusing low-level sexual desire for another man’s wife. In keeping with the Tenth Commandment, he is prohibiting *any* sexual desire for another man’s wife. In this case, the object of the desire is the defining moral concern, not the intensity of the desire.

¹⁷ BDAG’s discussion of ἐπιθυμία is based entirely upon the object of desire. If the object of desire is neutral or positive, then ἐπιθυμία is translated as “*desire, longing, craving*” (e.g. Mark 4:19; Rev 18:14; Phil 1:23; Luke 22:15; 1 Thess 2:17). If the object of desire is negative/sinful, then ἐπιθυμία is to be translated as “*craving, lust*” (e.g. Rom 7:7; Jas 1:14; 2 Pet 1:4; Col 3:5). BDAG 372.

¹⁸ The NET Bible’s note on this text indicates that the same dynamic is in play for the underlying Hebrew term for desire: “The verb קָמַד (*kehamad*) focuses not on an external act but on an internal men-

is teaching us that the Ten Commandments—properly understood—prohibit not only adultery and stealing but also the desires that lead to such deeds. The law is not prohibiting all *desire*, but only those desires that have a forbidden object.

Although Jesus is addressing the issue of adultery in particular in Matt 5:27–28, he has provided a standard by which we might evaluate sexual desires in general. Indeed, the tenth commandment’s prohibition on sinful desire generalizes beyond adultery, and on that basis we are justified to generalize as well.¹⁹ And here the implications extend to both heterosexual desire and same-sex desire.

First, the desire Jesus has in view is specifically sexual desire. Jesus is not talking about desires or attractions that are non-sexual in nature. In other words, we might speak of attractions in some sense that have no sexual possibility embedded within them. That is simply not what Jesus is talking about here. Jesus is speaking about sex-desire specifically. He is talking about the *sexual* attraction that a man might feel for another man’s wife.

Second, in the sexual desires and attractions that we experience, Jesus invites us to consider the object of those attractions. In ethical terms, Jesus is teaching us that desire/attraction is teleological. Our desires and attractions tend toward certain ends. If we want to understand our own desires, we have to know what *ends* our desires and attractions are aimed at. I have argued elsewhere that sexual ethics in general are teleological and that the ultimate virtue of our sexual lives consists in glorifying God with our bodies.²⁰ Here I am arguing essentially the same principle with respect to our desires and attractions. The only sex desire that glorifies God is that desire that is ordered to the covenant of marriage. When sexual desire/attraction fixes on any kind of non-marital erotic activity, it falls short of the glory of God and is by definition sinful. Again, this teleological principle applies to the experience of both opposite-sex and same-sex desire. The difference is that opposite-sex desire can have the covenant of marriage as its end or not, but same-sex desire can never have the covenant of marriage as its end.

II. DISTINGUISHING TEMPTATION FROM SINFUL DESIRE

One common objection to the argument thus far is that this account of things confuses temptation with sinful desire. The objection goes something like this: “The Bible teaches that it is not a sin to be tempted, but you make even the temp-

tal activity behind the act, the motivation for it. The word can be used in a very good sense (Ps 19:10; 68:16), but it has a bad connotation in contexts where the object desired is off limits. This command is aimed at curtailment of the greedy desire for something belonging to a neighbor, a desire that leads to the taking of it or the attempt to take it. It was used in the story of the Garden of Eden for the tree that was desired.” See *The NET Bible* (1st ed.; Biblical Studies Press, 2006).

¹⁹ So also Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) 189: “By saying ‘adultery’ Jesus technically addresses only lust for married women ... but this is an example that should provoke its hearers to consider related moral issues. Thus, for example, it rules out ‘fornication of the heart’ as well; Israelite law treated premarital sex in part as an offense against one’s future spouse and one’s partner’s future spouse (Deut 22:13–21).”

²⁰ Burk, *What Is the Meaning of Sex?* 43–59. See also my discussion of teleology and the purposes of sex on pp. 31–40.

tation to lust a sin. Are you not saying that all temptation is sin? Wasn't Jesus tempted like us yet without sin (Heb 4:15)? How can you say that temptation equals sin?"

The short answer to these questions is that I do not believe that all temptation equals sin. Plainly, Jesus was tempted, but he never sinned (Matt 4:1–11; Heb 4:15). So unless we want to imply that Jesus was a sinner, we must affirm that not all temptation equals sin. But in saying this, we must be careful to define what we mean by temptation and precisely what our temptation has in common with Jesus'. Too often we are guilty of projecting our own sinful experiences back onto Jesus. But this is precisely backwards. We should not make our sinful experience of temptation the paradigm for understanding Jesus' sinless experience of temptation. On the contrary, Jesus' sinless experience of temptation should be the measure of ours. There are both similarities and differences between Jesus' experience of temptation and ours. In order to see this, we will have to take a closer look at two key texts: Heb 4:15 and Jas 1:13–15.

3. *Jesus's experience of temptation.* Yes, Jesus was tempted in every way as we are, but his experience of temptation was not identical to ours. This is the necessary corollary of Christ's impeccability, and it is anticipated in Heb 4:15: "For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, *yet without sin*" (italics mine). There are at least two important observations to make about this text for our purposes.

First, the term for temptation (πειράζω) in this text is likely a specific reference to the redemptive sufferings of Christ. In general, the verb πειράζω means *to put someone to the test*.²¹ But the only other time Hebrews uses the term of Jesus is in 2:18, which is a specific reference to his sufferings: "For since He Himself was tempted [πειρασθεῖς] in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted [πειραζομένοις]." Many commentators, therefore, interpret the use of the term in 4:15 in light of its use in 2:18 and conclude that both are a reference to his suffering up to and including the cross.²² Thus for Jesus to be tempted in every way as we are does not mean that he himself faced each and every individual trial that each and every human has ever faced. Such an interpretation would of course be absurd. It means that he experienced the ultimate trial and temptation "according to likeness" [καθ' ὁμοίτητα]—a possible allusion to the fact that Jesus suffered as a human. That means that Jesus experienced his sufferings while being subject to all the frailties and weaknesses of embodied life. That is why the New English Bible renders it as "One who, because of his likeness to us, has been tested every way, only without sin."²³

²¹ See BDAG, s.v. πειράζω, 2.b.

²² E.g. Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) 183. See also Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 268–69: "This verse recalls 2:18, the only other place in which Hebrews uses πειράζω of Christ, and there πειρασθεῖς is related to his suffering (πέπονθεν), and by implication to his death. The same connection recurs in 5:7, though without the use of πειράζω, so an implicit allusion to the final test of the cross is possible, as perhaps in 12:4 (cf. 12:2)."

²³ As quoted in O'Brien, *Letter to the Hebrews* 184.

Second, the key thing to note about Jesus' suffering and temptation is that it was "without sin." There was no aspect of Jesus' temptation that ever involved sin on his part. He had no desires that predisposed him to sin. His response to external pressures never resulted in an evil thought or attraction. And of course, he never engaged in any sinful response to the suffering that he faced. From top to bottom, he was perfect, innocent, wholesome, and good in the face of every temptation. That means that Jesus' experience of temptation was never internalized into any disposition toward evil. Ever. Jesus' attractions—whatever they were—were never directed toward something that his Father had prohibited. Jesus' impeccability means not merely that he never sinned but that it was not possible for him to sin.²⁴ Thus we agree with Augustine, "God forbid that we should ever say that He is able to sin!"²⁵

This is not our experience of temptation. We experience a level of internalization that Jesus' impeccability never allowed. Yes, he faced the same sorts of external pressures to sin. No, those pressures never had a landing pad in his heart. In the face of withering Satanic attacks, He only always desired his Father's will (John 5:19; Matt 26:39). The words "without sin" indicate that—while Jesus faced temptations as we do—his experience of those temptations was quite different from ours in that his was *always* sinless.

Jesus' impeccability in this regard has provoked some people to wonder whether his experience of temptation can ever be as intense as that of the sinners that he came to save. Can he really have known our weaknesses when he himself was not capable of sinning? But this points us to a glorious irony of Jesus' sinless nature. It did not lessen his experience of temptation but only intensified it. Leon Morris has said it this way:

The man who yields to a particular temptation has not yet felt its full power. He has given in while the temptation has yet something in reserve. Only the man who does not yield to a temptation[,] who, as regards that particular temptation, is sinless, knows the full extent of that temptation.²⁶

4. *The sinner's experience of temptation.* Our experience of temptation is perhaps best described by James' words in Jas 1:13–15:

²⁴ Louis Berkhof defines Christ's impeccability: "This means not merely that Christ could avoid sinning (*potuit non peccare*), and did actually avoid it, but also that it was impossible for Him to sin (*non potuit peccare*) because of the essential bond between the human and the divine natures. . . . While Christ was made to be sin judicially, yet ethically He was free from both hereditary depravity and actual sin" (*Systematic Theology* [new ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996] 318). So also Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 539: "If we are asking if it was *actually* possible for Jesus to have sinned, it seems that we must conclude that it was not possible. The union of his human and divine natures in one person prevented it."

²⁵ Augustine, "A Treatise on Nature and Grace," in *St. Augustin: Anti-Pelagian Writings* (trans. Peter Holmes, Robert Ernest Wallis, and Benjamin B. Warfield; NPNF 5; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004) 115–51.

²⁶ Leon Morris, *Lord From Heaven* 51–52, quoted in Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) 737.

Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed *by his own desire* [ἐπιθυμίας]. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.

The text plainly says that God cannot be tempted by evil. In what way are we tempted by evil that God is not tempted by evil? Verse 14 gives the answer. We face temptations that arise from our “own desire” (1:14). By contrast, because Jesus never desired evil, Jesus never faced temptations arising from “his own sinful desire.” His heart never in any degree fixated on evil. Temptation had no landing pad in Jesus’ heart nor did it have a launching pad from Jesus’ heart. The same is not true of sinners, who are often carried away by their own desires, as James describes it.

John Owen writes of these two different experiences of temptation. On the one hand, there is temptation that arises outside of our desire. Jesus’s temptations were of this sort. On the other hand, there is temptation that is caused *by* our own sinful desires. The sinner’s temptations are often of this sort. In his comments on this text, John Owen writes,

Now, what is it to be tempted? It is to have that proposed to a man’s consideration which, if he close withal, it is evil, it is sin unto him. This is sin’s trade: Ἐπιθυμεῖ—“It lusteth.” It is raising up in the heart, and proposing unto the mind and affections, that which is evil; trying, as it were, whether the soul will close with its suggestions, or how far it will carry them on, though it do not wholly prevail. Now, when such a temptation comes from without, it is unto the soul an indifferent thing, neither good nor evil, unless it be consented unto; but the very proposal from *within*, it being the soul’s own act, is its sin.²⁷

Owen helps us to see something important in James’s text. There is another way in which our temptation differs from Jesus’s. When a sinner gives in to temptation, the transgression creates new temptations that may be themselves sinful. For example, because we often give in to the sin of covetousness, we are tempted by our own covetousness to get angry at anyone who deprives us of what we want. In that situation, the temptation to anger is our own covetousness. So the temptation is already sinful, and it is providing an occasion for another sin (anger) to emerge. Our sin snowballs, and one sin becomes a temptation for another sin. This never happened with Jesus. Jesus is not tempted by evil in this way. Because he never sinned, he never experienced the snowball effect that we experience. The one who gives in to temptation soon learns that sin does not satisfy sinful desires. It awakens them. And this never happened inside Jesus, but it happens to sinners continuously.

So it is possible to be tempted and not sin. Biblically speaking, temptation begins as a testing that is external to desire and that is therefore not necessarily sinful.

²⁷ John Owen, “The Nature, Power, Deceit, and Prevalency of the Remainders of Indwelling Sin in Believers,” in *Temptation and Sin* (repr. The Works of John Owen 6; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967) 194.

Jesus faced such temptations and never sinned. But when sinners succumb to temptation, they create internal temptations to sin that are themselves sinful.

This is James's point in Jas 1:13–15. The temptation in “each one is tempted” is explicitly tied to the sinner's inner inclination. Literally, “each one is tempted when, *by his own desire*, he is carried away and enticed” (italics mine). Is it possible that “desire” is morally benign? The word translated as “desire” (ESV) or “lust” (NASB) is ἐπιθυμία. Again, the only time ἐπιθυμία is good is when it is directed toward something morally praiseworthy. Ἐπιθυμία is always evil when it is directed toward something morally blameworthy. Thus, “desire” is not neutral anywhere in this text. It is a “desire” that “lures” and “entices.” In short, it is a desire that is directed toward evil. Thus the desires themselves are sinful. When such illicit desire conceives, it inevitably gives birth to sin because it *is* sin.²⁸ As Douglas Moo contends, “James now attributes temptation to each person's *evil desire* ... [defined as] any human longing for what God has prohibited.”²⁹

The crucial distinction between our experience of trials and temptations and Jesus' experience of that same is that we often move rather seamlessly and unconsciously from experience of the trial to desire for evil. Jesus' experience of such trials never happened that way. He experienced trials just as we do, yet he was always without sin.

5. *What Jesus teaches us about the “way of escape.”* If all of this is true, then what does it mean for us to be tempted while not sinning? After all, the apostle Paul says that God always provides “the way of escape” for us when we are tempted (1 Cor 10:13).

Our experience of temptation can possibly have both external and internal aspects. The “testing” of temptation is external. Jesus faced such external “testing” just like we do. Satan set before Jesus “temptations,” but those temptations were external to his desires. He never experienced the sin-snowball as it were. Satan never laid a finger on Jesus's holy resolve to do all his Father's holy will. Jesus experienced “temptation” in that external sense but the temptations never had a place within his heart. Biblically speaking, that is the moral space between temptation and sin. As long as temptation is external to desire, there is no sin. But sin is conceived when desire fixes on evil.

²⁸ A colleague who read an early draft of this article raised an insightful objection to this point in a private email. He wrote, “Do you adequately pay attention to the progression of thought? The desire *gives birth* to sin. That would seem to imply there is a process that results in sin, right?” My response: Notice that the Bible uses ἁμαρτία in at least two distinct senses. In some texts, it is a reference to sinful deeds (e.g. 1 Tim 5:4). In other texts, ἁμαρτία refers to a sinful principle/inclination that resides in the human heart (e.g. Rom 7:20, 23). BDAG confirms that range of meaning for the term. James only uses ἁμαρτία in reference to sinful deeds (see Jas 1:15; 2:9; 4:17; 5:15, 16, 20). That is how I take the meaning of ἁμαρτία in James 1. James is saying that fallen desire gives birth to sinful deeds. So that leaves us with the desire (ἐπιθυμία) that gives birth to the sinful deeds. Even though James does not use ἁμαρτία to refer to the desire, Paul does. Romans 7 is a chapter-long meditation on sinful ἐπιθυμία, and Paul unambiguously labels it as sin (see Rom 7:20, 23 etc.). In that sense, I think it is safe to label ἐπιθυμία as sin in James 1 as well.

²⁹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 74.

Consider how this pattern plays out in our own experience of sexual temptation. Perhaps Satan would set before a man an image of an attractive married woman. He might see her and apprehend that she is beautiful. But the moment that apprehension turns into a sexual attraction for her, it is sin within his heart. It has moved from an external temptation to an internal attraction that is unwholesome and forbidden by Scripture. Sinners leap right over this moral space all the time. It is so easy and natural to us. But Jesus never did. Such temptations were wholly external to his desires—he never desired something that his Father had forbidden.

This aspect of Jesus's impeccability ought to evoke worship when we really think about it. Jesus always looked at every woman and every man in a way that was without sin. He never experienced an untoward sexual desire for any person. He was able to sit with the woman at the well, for example, without the turmoil of disordered lusts that he ought not be feeling (John 4:1–42). When the disciples asked Jesus if he was hungry, Jesus commented about his time with the Samaritan woman, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to accomplish His work.” No bodily need ever trumped his desire to do His Father's will. He just saw her, loved her, and ministered to her without all the sinful wrestlings that we have to reckon with. Maybe she was beautiful. Maybe there was a bait to lust there. She had already made herself sexually available to at least five different men. And he was alone with her. But there was no place for that temptation to land in Jesus' heart. He was perfect. He always got it right both in his heart and in his deeds.

We err if we project our own sinful response to temptation onto Jesus. We often respond to temptation with a desire for evil. And our giving in to temptation can snowball into temptations arising from our own lusts. But Jesus never responded to temptation like that. Is temptation the same thing as sin? No, not necessarily. But let us not think that our frequent attraction to evil ever had a parallel in Jesus' heart. It did not.

III. EVALUATING SAME-SEX ORIENTATION

So how does all of this talk of temptation, desire, and sin map onto the contemporary notion of sexual orientation? And in particular, does it help us at all to answer the question we posed at the outset, “Is same-sex orientation sinful?” Again, the answer depends entirely on what we mean by orientation and what we mean by sinful.³⁰ In my previous writing on this subject, I have defined sexual orientation in the standard clinical terms.³¹ In other words, I defined it in the terms used by the American Psychological Association. The APA's definition reads as follows:

³⁰ It is sometimes claimed that sexual orientation is a modern concept that would have been completely foreign to the writers of Scripture. E.g. John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) 109, 117. Insofar as sexual orientation refers to a person's experience of sexual desire, this claim is certainly not true.

³¹ Denny Burk, “Is Homosexual Orientation Sinful?” *Canon & Culture* (18 February 2014) <http://www.canonandculture.com/is-homosexual-orientation-sinful/>; idem, “Suppressing the Truth in Unrighteousness: Matthew Vines Takes on the NT” 47–48.

Sexual orientation refers to an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, or both sexes. Sexual orientation also refers to a person's sense of identity based on those attractions, related behaviors, and membership in a community of others who share those attractions.³²

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

6. *Same-sex orientation as sexual attraction.* As I mentioned before, my previous work has been focused mainly on this component. I do not think that focus was misplaced insofar as the other components flow from this one. It is at this level that the rubber meets the road in terms of the lived experience of those who are attracted to the same sex. And it is also at this level that the Bible speaks so clearly. When a person feels themselves experiencing an attraction or a desire toward a person of the same sex, what is their responsibility before God at that point? Is a desire for sexual activity with a person of the same sex a morally benign desire? In the terms that Jesus teaches us, it is always sinful to desire something that God forbids. And the very experience of the desire becomes an occasion for repentance. And it is pastoral malpractice to tell someone who is feeling a sexual attraction for a person of the same sex that they need not repent. In the moment they feel their sexual desire aroused in such a way—in that moment—they must confess the desire as sinful and turn from it. It is on these terms that John and Paul Feinberg render this verdict on sexual orientation: “We stand firmly committed to the position that Scripture teaches that homosexual and lesbian orientation and behavior are contrary to the order for human sexuality God placed in creation. Hence they are sinful.”³³

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

³² “Answers to Your Questions: For a Better Understanding of Sexual Orientation & Homosexuality” (American Psychological Association, 2008); online: <http://www.apa.org/topics/sexuality/orientation.pdf>.

³³ Feinberg and Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World* 385. So also James B. DeYoung, *Homosexuality: Contemporary Claims Examined in Light of the Bible and Other Ancient Literature and Law* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2000) 293–94: “Homosexual orientation was known in the generations in which Scripture was written. Paul gives no indication that it does not fall under the general condemnations of homosexuality in Romans 1, 1 Corinthians, and 1 Timothy.”

ence as unchosen realities.³⁴ Nevertheless, the Bible characterizes such realities as sin: pride, anger, anxiousness, just to name a few. Why would we put same-sex attraction in a different category than those other predispositions that we groan to be delivered from and that we are called to repent of? Jesus says that all such sins proceed from the heart and that we are therefore morally accountable for them (Mark 7:21). And this assessment is in no way mitigated by the possibility that we come by it naturally or were born that way.³⁵ As Richard Hays writes,

The Bible's sober anthropology rejects the apparently commonsense assumption that only freely chosen acts are morally culpable. Quite the reverse: the very nature of sin is that it is *not* freely chosen. That is what it means to live "in the flesh" in a fallen creation. We are in bondage to sin but still accountable to God's righteous judgment of our actions. In light of this theological anthropology, it cannot be maintained that a homosexual orientation is morally neutral because it is involuntary.³⁶

Hays is correct. The issue really is not a new one. At the end of the day, our moral assessment of sexual attraction forces us back onto terrain that has been

³⁴ Herman Bavinck, however, makes the case that the will is involved even in involuntary sins. His remarks to that end are profound, and I quote at length: "Though it is true that the voluntary element in this restricted sense is not always a constituent in the concept of sin, the sins of the human state and involuntary sins still do not totally occur apart from the will. There is not only an antecedent but also a concomitant, a consequent, and an approving will. Later, to a greater or lesser degree, the will approves of the sinfulness of our nature and takes delight in it. . . . It can be said that at the most fundamental level all sin is voluntary. There is nobody or nothing that compels the sinner to serve sin. Sin is enthroned not outside the sinner but in the sinner and guides the sinner's thinking and desiring in its own direction. It is the sinner's sin insofar as the sinner has made it his or her own by means of his or her various faculties and powers." See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 144. Thanks to Tony Reinke for alerting me to this section in Bavinck's work.

³⁵ As far as the science is concerned, it is not credible to be dogmatic as to what causes a particular sexual orientation. From a clinical perspective, the research simply does not allow one to land definitively on either nature or nurture. Mark Yarhouse and Erica Tan explain, "We do not know the causes of same-sex attractions or homosexual orientation (nor do we know the causes of attraction to the opposite-sex, as such). Most experts today seem to believe that sexual orientation is the result of many possible contributing factors, both from nature (broadly understood) and from nurture (also broadly understood). These factors are likely weighted differently for different people." See Mark A. Yarhouse and Erica S. N. Tan, *Sexuality and Sex Therapy: A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2014) 298–99. See also "Answers to Your Questions: For a Better Understanding of Sexual Orientation and Homosexuality," *American Psychological Association* (2008); online: <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/sexual-orientation.aspx>: "There is no consensus among scientists about the exact reasons that an individual develops a heterosexual, bisexual, gay, or lesbian orientation. Although much research has examined the possible genetic, hormonal, developmental, social, and cultural influences on sexual orientation, no findings have emerged that permit scientists to conclude that sexual orientation is determined by any particular factor or factors. Many think that nature and nurture both play complex roles; most people experience little or no sense of choice about their sexual orientation." So also, American Psychiatric Association (2013), http://www.psychiatry.org/File%20Library/Learn/Archives/ps2013_Homosexuality.pdf: "The American Psychiatric Association believes that the causes of sexual orientation (whether homosexual or heterosexual) are not known at this time and likely are multifactorial including biological and behavioral roots which may vary between different individuals and may even vary over time."

³⁶ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the NT: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to NT Ethics* (New York: HarperOne, 1996) 390.

well-traversed by theologians over the past twenty centuries. The matter really does come down to one's anthropology.

If you view human nature as a *tabula rasa* and if you reduce sin/sinfulness to one's behavior—that which one chooses to do—then you are going to assess the morality of same-sex sexual attraction a certain way. If, however, you regard the human condition as fundamentally flawed—that we are sinful not only in our choices but also in our nature—then you are going to approach the matter in a different way. And that difference goes back at least as far as Augustine and Pelagius. And the evangelical tradition—especially in its Reformed expressions—has sided definitively with Augustine.

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

We do attribute moral character to principles which precede all voluntary action and which are entirely independent of the power of the will.... We hold ourselves responsible not only for the deliberate acts of the will, that is, for acts of deliberate self-determination, which suppose both knowledge and volition, but also for emotional, impulsive acts, which precede all deliberation; and not only for such impulsive acts, but also for the principles, dispositions, or immanent states of the mind, by which its acts whether impulsive or deliberate, are determined. When a man is convinced of sin, it is not so much for specific acts of transgression that his conscience condemns him, as for the permanent states of his mind; his selfishness, worldliness, and maliciousness; his ingratitude, unbelief, and hardness of heart; his want of right affections, of love to God, of zeal for the Redeemer, and of benevolence towards men. These are not acts. They are not states of mind under control of the will; and yet in the judgment of conscience, which we cannot silence or pervert, they constitute our character and are just ground of condemnation.³⁷

Hodge does not leave it there. He makes a scriptural argument for this view and concludes, “The denial, therefore, that dispositions or principles as distinguished from acts, can have a moral character, subverts some of the most plainly revealed doctrines of the sacred Scriptures.”³⁸ The key doctrine he has in mind is the doctrine of original sin. On this point, Hodge writes,

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

³⁷ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999) 2.107.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 2.110.

versal judgment of men, the word of God, and the Church universal, so distinctly assert the contrary.³⁹

Hodge's key point is this. We are sinners by nature and by choice. At the most fundamental level, in fact, our nature produces our choices.⁴⁰ We inherit a sinful nature from our father Adam so that we are spring-loaded to sin.⁴¹ And that is not merely a word for people experiencing same-sex attraction. That is a word for all of us. Same-sex attraction is merely one variety of fallenness. But make no mistake. It is not the only one. We are all fallen and are in this predicament together.

Hodge's account of sin and of the nature of man is not an outlier. It represents the mainstream of evangelical—and especially Reformed—anthropology.⁴² It also happens to be the scriptural position. Modern attempts to take same-sex sexual attraction—or even same-sex orientation—out from this biblical framework are doomed to failure. They produce a superficial understanding of sin and the human condition, and they hinder people from perceiving their need for the transformation that Jesus provides.

7. *Same-sex orientation as emotional and romantic attraction.* What are we to make of emotional and romantic components of attraction to the same sex? Are they sinful in the same way that the desire for homosexual sex is sinful? Here is where many

³⁹ Ibid. 2.113.

⁴⁰ Louis Berkhof explains, "Sin does not consist only in overt acts, but also in sinful habits and in a sinful condition of the soul. ... The sinful acts and dispositions of man must be referred to and find their explanation in a corrupt nature. ... The state or condition of man is thoroughly sinful. ... In conclusion it may be said that sin may be defined as *lack of conformity to the moral law of God, either in act, disposition, or state.*" See Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* 233.

⁴¹ The doctrine of original sin in the Reformed tradition implies a total depravity of human nature. This does not mean that any particular sinner is as sinful as he could possibly be. It means that every part of the sinner is polluted by sin and is therefore inclined toward evil. John Calvin gives the classic formulation: "Original sin, therefore, seems to be a hereditary depravity and corruption of our nature, diffused into all parts of the soul, which first makes us liable to God's wrath, then also brings forth in us those works which Scripture calls 'works of the flesh'.... We are so vitiated and perverted in every part of our nature that by this great corruption we stand justly condemned and convicted before God, to whom nothing is acceptable but righteousness, innocence, and purity." See Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* 251.

⁴² The Reformed tradition elaborated Augustine's view on this point (see note above) and specified that original sin means that all humanity inherit both Adam's guilt and his sinful nature. Inheriting Adam's sinful nature means that every person is born into a state of total depravity that can only be remedied by the redemption found in Christ. That depravity manifests itself in a heart that is naturally and sinfully at odds with God and his law. The Christian is someone whose nature has been renewed by the Holy Spirit and who is no longer in bondage to indwelling sin. Nevertheless, even the Christian has to wrestle against a sinful nature that is not completely eradicated until the resurrection of the body. This means that our experience of sinful desire/attraction is often involuntary and unchosen and arising spontaneously from our sinful nature. John Owen's classic *The Nature and Power of Indwelling Sin* says it this way: "I know no greater burden in the life of a believer than these involuntary surprisals of soul; involuntary, I say, as to the actual consent of the will, but not so in respect of that corruption which is in the will, and is the principle of them. ... And this is the first thing in this lusting of the law of sin,—it consists in its habitual propensity unto evil, manifesting itself by the involuntary surprisals of the soul unto sin, and its readiness, without dispute or consideration, to join in all temptations whatever." See Owen, "The Nature, Power, Deceit, and Prevalency of the Remainders of Indwelling Sin in Believers."

people confuse the issue. Wesley Hill, for example, argues that same-sex attraction cannot be reduced to a desire for same-sex genital contact. He argues that same-sex attraction also includes a desire for same-sex friendship and even a “preference” for same-sex companionship.⁴³ I do not deny that same-sex attracted persons report heightened emotional connections with persons of the same-sex and that they perceive those connections as part of their attractions. Nevertheless, the defining element of same-sex attraction is desire for a sexual relationship with someone of the same sex. When same-sex sexual desire is removed from the equation, then we are no longer talking about same-sex attraction—at least not in the sense that modern people mean the term. When modern people talk about same-sex attraction, they intend a kind of attraction that includes sexual possibility between persons of the same sex. They do not mean to label as *gay* every person capable of emotional bonds with a person of the same sex. No, it is the same-sex sexual desire that is the constitutive element.

One might find parallels between the non-sexual bonds of a gay couple and the non-sexual bonds of straight same-sex friends. But even though there are parallels, there is a crucial distinction. The bonds of affection between straight friends do not contain within them sexual possibility.⁴⁴ The bonds of affection between David and Jonathon or Jesus and John, for example, did not contain sexual possibility. The same is not true of the bonds of affection between gay couples. In fact, those bonds are defined in part *by* their sexual possibility.⁴⁵

What then are we to make of the emotional bonds gay people experience for persons of the same sex? Can those attractions be sanctified?⁴⁶ Yes, they can. They can be sanctified when they are shorn of the elements that otherwise make them sinful. When sexual possibility and intention are removed through repentance and faith toward God, there can exist the real bonds of holy, God-honoring same-sex friendship. But those bonds can only be cultivated when we recognize that the desire for sinful sex can never be the foundation for holy friendships. Holy friendships are the fruit of chastity in both thought and deed.

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

⁴³ Wesley Hill, “Is Being Gay Sanctifiable?” in *Issues in Sexuality and Gender* (presented at the 66th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, San Diego, CA, 2014) 5.

⁴⁴ In cases where such erotic possibilities are not present, we are simply not talking about what the APA means by homosexual orientation.

⁴⁵ We could multiply examples here, but I will just mention one from Simon LeVay’s 2011 book on the science of sexual orientation. He writes, “Sexual orientation has to do with the sex of our preferred sex partners. More specifically, it is the trait that predisposes us to experience sexual attraction to people of the same sex as ourselves (*homosexual, gay, or lesbian*), to persons of the other sex (*heterosexual or straight*), or to both sexes (*bisexual*).” See Simon LeVay, *Gay, Straight, and the Reason Why: The Science of Sexual Orientation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 1.

⁴⁶ This is the question the Wesley Hill asks in his aforementioned essay. See Hill, “Is Being Gay Sanctifiable?”

We should note that even though the APA's clinical definition speaks of sexual orientation as identity, that concept is being vigorously contested right now by queer theorists. For example, Hanne Blank argues in her book *Straight: The Surprisingly Short History of Heterosexuality* that the terms heterosexual and homosexual are "neologisms" of the modern era. She writes, "These terms came to exist because a need was perceived to identify people as representatives of generic types distinguished on the basis of their tendencies to behave sexually in particular ways."⁴⁷ In this sense neither homosexuality nor heterosexuality are fixed identity markers. Rather, they are socially constructed terms, and people's sexual proclivities are in actuality more variable than we have been led to believe.⁴⁸ It is ironic that just as many evangelicals are coming to embrace the notion of sexual orientation, many queer theorists are moving away from it as a fixed identity marker.

But it is not just queer theorists who are destabilizing the concept of orientation as identity. In an important article earlier this year in *First Things*, Michael Hannon contends that the concept of sexual orientation as identity actually undermines the teleological tradition of Christian sexual ethics. In other words, he argues that over the last 150 years the West has allowed "sexual orientations" to replace the "teleological tradition with a brand new creation."⁴⁹ Under the new regime, a person's identity would no longer be conceived in terms of a Creator's purpose but in terms of one's personal sense of attraction to either or both sexes. In this way the natural law tradition has given way to "psychiatric normality" and has paved the way for a new sexual ethic based on sexual orientation identities.⁵⁰ Hannon thus concludes, "The role of Christian chastity today, I argue, is to dissociate the Church from the false absolutism of identity based upon erotic tendency."⁵¹ In short: In God's world, we are who God says we are. We are not merely the sum total of our fallen sexual desires.

For these reasons, same-sex orientation as an identity category is problematic. From a Christian perspective, it invites us to embrace fictional identities that go directly against God's revealed purposes for his creation. It invites us to define ourselves and the meaning of our lives according to the sum total of our fallen sexual attractions. But God's purposes for us are obscured if we make our sinful sexual attractions the touchstone of our being. God gives us a bodily identity that indicates his purposes for us sexually, and those purposes are unambiguously ordered to the opposite sex within the covenant of marriage. To embrace an identity that goes against God's revealed purpose is by definition sinful.⁵² It is for this reason

⁴⁷ Hanne Blank, *Straight: The Surprisingly Short History of Heterosexuality* (Boston: Beacon, 2012) 4.

⁴⁸ Jonathan Katz argues that heterosexual orientation is a social construction of late modernity. See Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) 18.

⁴⁹ Michael W. Hannon, "Against Heterosexuality," *First Things* 241 (March 2014) 28.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 33.

⁵² Mark Yarhouse argues that gay identity is a self-understanding that is defined by one's sexual attractions. Moreover, gay identity involves *assent* to those attractions and to the behaviors that stem from those attractions. He writes, "With the swinging of the pendulum toward identity comes the conclusion that all things homosexual are good and all things heterosexual are questionable." See Mark A. Yarhouse,

that Rosaria Butterfield argues that Christians ought to stop using the term *sexual orientation* as an identity category. She writes:

At its best, sexual orientation is a vestige of our flesh. The term itself cannot be labeled sin or grace. One's sexual orientation—heterosexual or homosexual—cannot be sanctified, because sanctification would indeed cause its obliteration. And while you must repent of sexual sin, you cannot repent of sexual orientation, since sexual orientation is an artificial category.⁵³

IV. CONCLUSION

So how do we answer the question, “Is same-sex orientation sinful?” Insofar as same-sex orientation designates the experience of sexual desire for a person of the same-sex, yes, it is sinful. Insofar as same-sex orientation indicates emotional/romantic attractions that brim with erotic possibility, yes, those attractions too are sinful. Insofar as sexual orientation designates an identity, yes, that identity too is a sinful fiction that contradicts God's purposes for his creation.

If these observations about sexual orientation are true, there are numerous pastoral implications. I will mention just three:

(1) To call same-sex orientation sinful does not make gay people less like the rest of us. On the contrary, it makes them more like the rest of us. We are not singling out gay people as if their experience is somehow more repugnant than everyone else's experience of living with a sinful nature. All of us bear the marks of our connection to Adam. All of us are crooked deep down. All of us have thoughts, inclinations, attitudes, and the like that are deeply antithetical to God's intention for us. All of us need a renewal from the inside out that can come only from the grace of Christ. We are in this predicament together. We do not stand apart.

(2) These truths ought to inform how brothers and sisters in Christ wage war against same-sex attraction. Sin is not merely what we do. It is also who we are. As so many of our confessions have it, we are sinners by nature and by choice.⁵⁴ All of us are born with an orientation toward sin in all its varieties. The ongoing experience of same-sex sexual attraction is but one manifestation of our common experience of indwelling sin—indeed, of the mind set on the flesh (Rom 7:23; 8:7). For that reason, the Bible teaches us to war against both the root and the fruit of sin. In this case, same-sex attraction is the root, and same-sex sexual behavior is the fruit. The Spirit of God aims to transform both (Rom 8:13).

If same-sex attraction were morally benign, there would be no reason to repent of it. But the Bible never treats sexual attraction to the same sex as a morally neutral state. Jesus says all sexual immorality is fundamentally a matter of the heart.

Homosexuality and the Christian: A Guide for Parents, Pastors, and Friends (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2010) 46. See also *ibid.* 44–50.

⁵³ This quotation is taken from an early draft of Rosaria Butterfield, “Sexual Orientation, Identity, and Why Words Matter,” the fourth chapter in *Openness, Unbindered* (forthcoming).

⁵⁴ E.g. *The New Hampshire Baptist Confession*, III: “All mankind are now sinners, not by constraint, but choice; being by nature utterly void of that holiness required by the law of God, positively inclined to evil.”

Thus it will not do simply to avoid same sex behavior. The ordinary means of grace must be aimed at the heart as well. Prayer, the preaching of the word, and the fellowship of the saints must all be aimed at the Holy Spirit's renewal of the inner man (2 Cor 4:16). It is to be a spiritual transformation that puts to death the deeds of the body by a daily renewal of the mind (Rom 8:13; 12:2). The aim of this transformation is not heterosexuality but holiness.⁵⁵

This is not to say that Christians who experience same-sex attraction will necessarily be freed from those desires completely in this life. Many such Christians report partial or complete changes in their attractions after conversion—sometimes all at once, but more often over a period of months and years. But those cases are not the norm. There are a great many who also report ongoing struggles with same-sex attraction.⁵⁶ But that does not lessen the responsibility for them to fight those desires as long as they persist, no matter how natural those desires may feel. The Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit can bring about this kind of transformation in anyone—even if such progress is not experienced by everyone in precisely the same measure. As the apostle Paul writes, “Thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed” (Rom 6:17).

(3) This truth ought to strengthen our love and compassion for brothers and sisters who experience same-sex attraction. For many of them, same-sex attraction is something they have experienced for as long as they can remember. There is no obvious pathology for their attractions. The attractions are what they are even though they may be quite unwelcome. It is naïve to think that these people are all outside of the church. No, they are among us. They are us. They have been baptized, have been attending the Lord's Table with us, and have been fighting the good fight in what is sometimes a very lonely struggle. They believe what the Bible says about their sexuality, but their struggle is nevertheless difficult.

Is your church the kind of place that would be safe for these dear brothers and sisters to come forward to find friendship and community? Is your home the kind of place that would be safe for these dear brothers and sisters to come forward to find friendship and community? Do your church and your home have arms wide open to them to come alongside them, to receive them, and to strengthen them? Jesus said that the world would know us by our love for one another (John 13:35). One of the ways that we show love for one another is by bearing one another's burdens (Gal 6:2). Can you bear this burden with your brothers and sisters who are in this fight? Are you ready to offer help and encouragement to these saints for whom Christ died? If not, then something is deeply amiss. For Jesus has loved us to the uttermost, and he calls us to do the same (John 13:34).

⁵⁵ As John Owen has famously said, “Be killing sin or it will be killing you.” See John Owen, “Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers,” in *Temptation and Sin* (The Works of John Owen 6; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967) 9.

⁵⁶ Yarhouse, *Homosexuality and the Christian* 93–95.