

HOLY SEXUALITY

God's Good Intent for All

Over the last few years, my dad, mom, and I have had the privilege of getting to know numerous fathers and mothers with children identifying as gay or lesbian. We've been able to personally walk with several of these parents through difficult stages of their journey. For many, it's been a long and emotional ride. I'll never forget meeting one particular mother.

As she approached, the look on her face revealed that it took all her strength to keep it together. She stepped toward me and lowered her head into her hands. The dam broke, and the tears flowed as she released her pent-up emotions. I put my hand on her shoulder and said softly, "It's okay. It's okay."

She tried to get out the words she'd come to say but couldn't stop weeping. I offered a few more words of comfort to fill the void, telling her I had all the time she needed. After a few moments, she was able to put together a sentence. "I just . . . just want my son . . . to be normal."

Normal.

Through sobs, this devastated mother recounted that her son had told her he was gay and was moving in with his boyfriend. She was crushed and hadn't told anyone, including her husband. She continued to express deep disappointment, wondering why this son couldn't be like

her other son—*normal*—with a steady girlfriend and even a baby on the way.

Somehow this mother's moral compass had been thrown off. She failed to realize that her idea of right was actually wrong. In her view, her gay son was not okay, while her fornicating one was fine. Like many today, this grieving mother wrongly equated normal—that is, all forms of heterosexuality, including extramarital relationships—with moral and good. I know some of you may be thinking right now, *But heterosexuality is ordained by God!* Stay with me and hear me out. This may be one of the most important points of the book.

Without doubt, same-sex relationships are sinful. But does this mean that heterosexuality—in *all its forms*—is blessed by God? Many assume it is. For decades, the aim of some “Christian” counseling for those with unwanted same-sex attractions has been to develop “heterosexual potential.”¹

However, does the Bible truly promote and wholly bless heterosexuality *in all its forms*? Heterosexuality constitutes the correct general direction, but does it adequately and fully describe how we all should behave sexually? What about unmarried people? How about those not in any relationship?

What is the biblical standard for sexuality? Does heterosexuality accurately and comprehensively describe sexual morality for everyone married and single? As evangelicals, our benchmark is Scripture, and everything must be measured to it.

Time to Break Free

To begin, we must define *sexuality*. According to the *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, sexuality consists of dif-

ferent aspects: sexual expression, sexual desires, and a capacity for sexual desires.² Since actions are more concrete and easier to assess than desires, we'll start there and then, in the following three chapters, address desires and capacity for desires.

In this chapter, we'll analyze what sexual expression is and whether heterosexuality accurately and comprehensively represents God's perfect and specific standard. If it does not, then we'll seek to find a correct term to fully and unambiguously articulate biblical sexuality. Once we're able to establish the criteria for sexual behavior, we'll be better positioned to evaluate the other two aspects of desires and capacity for desires.

To aid in our assessment, here's a definition for *heterosexual*: "pertaining to sexual relations between people of opposite sex."³ This is exceedingly broad and would include behavior the Bible deems sinful—for example, a man sleeping with several different women, a husband cheating on his wife with another lady, and even a committed monogamous relationship between a cohabiting boyfriend and girlfriend. Today, these three scenarios of heterosexuality may be common and normal but are without question sinful in God's eyes.

Yet some Christians would actually consider these "success" stories for same-sex-attracted individuals who have achieved their "heterosexual potential." The Bible does not bless every indiscriminate variety of opposite-sex relationship. God declares that only sex between a husband and a wife in marriage is good. Every sexual expression outside this context—whether in an opposite-sex relationship or a same-sex relationship—God condemns as sinful.

Here are a few biblical examples of sinful sexual relationships that would be defined as heterosexual. In the Old Testament, we read about the incest of Lot's daughters with their father (Genesis 19:31–36), the rape of Dinah by Shechem (Genesis 34:2), the fornication of Samson and

the prostitute (Judges 16:1), the adultery of David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:1–5), the incestuous rape of Tamar by Amnon (2 Samuel 13:1–19), and the harlotry of Gomer, Hosea’s wife (Hosea 3:1–3).

In the New Testament, we are told about the incest and adultery of Herod (Matthew 14:3–4; Mark 6:17–18; Luke 3:19), the prodigal son with prostitutes (Luke 15:30), the unmarried Samaritan woman living with the sixth in a series of men (John 4:16–18), and the church in Corinth’s boasting about a man who “has his father’s wife” (1 Corinthians 5:1). The New Testament mentions adultery (Greek *moicheia* with its four other forms) thirty-two times and sexual immorality (*porneia* with its three other forms) fifty-five times—and these mainly refer to heterosexual sin.

By simply stating that “heterosexuality is right” without qualification, we imply a tacit endorsement of all the sexual immorality listed above. Certainly, not all heterosexual behavior or relationships are sinful—the union between a husband and a wife is blessed by God—but we must also recognize that heterosexuality is *not* synonymous with biblical marriage. This is the bottom line: By broadly affirming heterosexuality, we also, whether inadvertently or not, endorse heterosexual sin.

As I discussed in my chapter on identity, the terms *heterosexual* and *homosexual* originate from a secular anthropology that elevates sexual desires as a legitimate way to categorize humanity. Is this really an ontological category Christians should espouse? Are we in fact defined by our sexual desires and behaviors?

The world espouses these terms, *heterosexuality* and *homosexuality*, in part because sexual desires and sexual expression are of utmost importance to them. It’s trumpeted in our classrooms and on our television screens that sex and sexuality are inseparable, necessary, and essential aspects of who we are.

Borrowing this secular, human-made category of heterosexuality to

describe how Christians must live misses God's perfect standard for sexual expression. The Bible does not categorize humanity according to our sexual desires—or any other sort of desire.

We live in a new world that not only embraces same-sex marriage as legitimate but also conflates heterosexuality and homosexuality with who we are. Using a term that confuses our true identity is unwise, and embracing such a broad category that includes sinful behavior should be roundly rejected. In our culture of confusion, ambiguity is no longer an option. Instead of affirming what's generally normal, common, or usual, we must look precisely at what's *biblical*.

But what other options do we have, you may ask, other than heterosexuality and homosexuality? What we need is a completely new paradigm to represent God's sexual ethic.

Holy sexuality.

We've pigeonholed ourselves into the wrong framework for biblical sexual expression: heterosexuality, bisexuality, or homosexuality. It's time to break free from this paradigm and embrace God's vision for sexuality. Holy sexuality consists of two paths: chastity in singleness and faithfulness in marriage. Chastity is more than simply abstention from extramarital sex; it conveys purity and holiness. Faithfulness is more than merely maintaining chastity and avoiding illicit sex; it conveys covenantal commitment.

Both of these embody the *only* correct biblical sexual ethic and unambiguously articulate the exact expressions of sexual behavior that God blesses. Too often Christians focus only on marriage but forget about singleness. Case in point—heterosexuality says nothing about chastity in singleness. Yet God blesses both biblical marriage and singleness; one without the other doesn't sufficiently describe God's will. In a world that blurs the lines of morality into every shade of gray, we must realize that biblical sexuality is more black and white than we think.

To be honest, I'm really not presenting anything new or monumental. From Genesis to Revelation, in the entirety of the biblical witness, only two paths align with God's standard for sexual expression: if you're single, be sexually abstinent while fleeing lustful desires; if you're married, be sexually and emotionally faithful to your spouse of the opposite sex while also fleeing lustful desires.

No terminology has accurately represented the biblical standard for sexual expression, which encompasses these two ways of living. While the category of heterosexuality includes some sinful behavior, it also does not clearly include chaste singleness. Therefore, a new phrase is necessary—*holy sexuality*. The purpose of this phrase is to transcend the current secular paradigm of sexual orientation that is unable to point toward God's clear intent for sexual expression.

This term *holy sexuality* is meant to simplify and disentangle the complex and confusing conversation around sexuality. The truth is that God's standard for *everyone* is holy sexuality: chastity in singleness and faithfulness in marriage. Different expectations for different people are not only unfair; they're unbiblical. Instead of determining how we ought to live based on enduring patterns of erotic desires, God's call for *all* humanity, quite simply, is holiness.

The argument against same-sex relationships has often been primarily or exclusively an appeal to natural design. Sometimes Scripture is only tangentially mentioned. This prioritizes general revelation (nature) above special revelation (Scripture). Both are important; however, natural design has its limitations to fully and accurately communicate biblical sexuality.

Natural design points only to opposite-sex sexual intimacy—in other words, heterosexuality *in all its forms*. Thus, a natural design argument on its own obscures heterosexual sin. It's Scripture that specifically points to one man and one woman in marriage or to chaste singleness,

which is why holy sexuality is an exact and full explanation for a biblical sexual ethic.

The inspired and inerrant Word of God defines marriage as a holy covenant between a husband and wife before God. The world has rejected this definition and made up a new one. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines marriage as “the legally or formally recognized union of two people as partners in a personal relationship.”⁴

Therefore, to affirm the correct, biblical definition of marriage, I will use the phrase *biblical marriage* and sometimes, for the sake of brevity, *marriage*. To refer to the incorrect and unbiblical form, I will always use a modifier—*same-sex marriage*.

Holy sexuality is chastity in singleness and faithfulness in marriage. Notice that I'm careful to describe these as two paths, not “choices.” Singleness for most is *not* a choice. If you think about it, no one is born married—we're all born single! Singleness is default. While a few may choose to *remain* single, it's never initially our own choice. Ultimately, some of these difficult paths are determined by our sovereign God.

At thirty-three, Bill became a Christian after being in and out of same-sex relationships for eleven years. He had a desire to marry and have children. However, thirty years later, he remains unmarried and perseveres in the midst of his same-sex attractions. Now sixty-three, he has been able to find contentment in his singleness. Bill leads a full life and mentors many men with similar experiences as himself. He also realizes that most singles in the church aren't single by choice—whether experiencing same-sex attractions or not.

You may be thinking, then, that lifelong singleness is the only option for same-sex-attracted people. Allow me to recount an interesting story of another friend who thought he had only one option until God did the unexpected.

After years in the gay community, Mark became a Christian and no

longer pursued same-sex relationships. He never had interest in women even as a new believer. With a close network of friends from his new family, the church, he was content to be single for the rest of his life—assuming it was his only option.

Mark had a close friend, Andrea, who was also a new follower of Christ. She came out of a broken past that consisted of abusive boyfriends and a few abortions. Because of her past toxic relationships, she'd decided to hold off on dating to focus on her relationship with God.

The two felt really safe together. Mark knew she didn't want to date, and Andrea knew he wasn't attracted to girls. He considered her his best friend and most trusted confidante. He loved her like a sister.

After some time, Mark began noticing new things about her. New affections blossomed—both physical and emotional. He jokes now, saying that puberty was hard enough to go through once; try going through puberty twice! He built up enough courage and asked Andrea out on a date.

After several months of dating, he asked her to marry him! And on their wedding night, he confessed to his new bride, "Honey, I cannot explain this. I'm not attracted to any other women. I'm only attracted to you."

In life, God determines what path we'll be on. Bill wanted to marry but remains single today. Mark was content as a single man, but now he's married to Andrea. Sometimes it's not what we expect or even want at the time. For some, it's singleness; for others, it's marriage. And when a man and woman obediently heed God's call to marry each other, God will provide everything those two people need to fulfill their covenant relationship.

Mark may still experience attractions toward the same sex, but God has supernaturally given him emotional, romantic, and sexual affections for Andrea that he never had for any other woman. Who are we to say that the improbable is absolutely impossible?

Sexual Desire in Marriage

Here's something else to think about: Is sexual desire truly a prerequisite for marriage? Is eroticism the litmus test for a godly and healthy covenantal union? Or has the sexual revolution influenced us to distort marriage into merely the outlet for our sexual appetite and little else?

Actually, we may be guilty of oversexualizing marriage. Let's reevaluate the assumption that the absence of sexual passion is often equated with an unhealthy marriage. Consensual sexual intimacy in marriage is good, but I'm not convinced it's the bedrock of a successful marriage. If you ask couples married over fifty years, it's unlikely you'll hear them say that great sex was the defining factor of their love. Is it wrong for sexual desires to develop over time?

Before my conversion, I heard the "Christian" message loud and clear: homosexuality is wrong, and heterosexuality is right. If I wanted to become a Christian, I had to be sexually attracted to women—as if the more erotic desires I had for women, the more of a Christian man I would be. Christians have wrongly assumed—and some still do—that the *main* goal for someone like me is to stop or lessen same-sex attractions and to develop opposite-sex attractions.

You may ask, "What's the harm in that? If a same-sex-attracted individual wants to marry someone of the opposite sex, wouldn't developing heterosexual attractions help achieve that goal?" But by making sexual desire the main objective, we could end up going from one gutter to another. Let me relate to you this real story as an illustration.

A pastor I met had a friend with same-sex attractions who was going through orientation-change counseling. One day while driving down the highway and passing a billboard for a local strip club, his friend noted how the scantily clad female model looked "hot."

The pastor was taken aback and even explained that in any other

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

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

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

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

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

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

“SEXUAL ORIENTATION”

Blind Acceptance or Critical Assessment?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sexual orientation refers to an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, or both sexes. Sexual orientation also refers to a person’s sense of identity based on those attractions, related behaviors, and membership in a community of others who share those attractions.³

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

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

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

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

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

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

A Biblical Orientation Paradigm

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Living in the Already but Not Yet

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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