

Is Same-Sex Attraction Sinful?

Selected Scriptures

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Introduction

Well, here we are at the Shepherds' Conference—a conference whose theme this year is devoted to attaining *doctrinal clarity*. And one area in which the church is in desperate need of doctrinal clarity is on biblical sexual ethics—and particularly on the question that is the title of our seminar: Is Same-Sex Attraction Sinful?

There continue to be mainline churches and denominations caving on the issue of homosexual practice. The United Methodist Church announced the potential for a split in the denomination over whether to ordain unrepentant homosexuals to the ministry. And while I'm sure there are churches who call themselves evangelical who would also call themselves “affirming” of homosexuality, there seems to be just enough sanity within the conservative evangelical church to hold the line on the sinfulness of homosexual practice, for which we thank God. But there is not as much clarity within our circles of semi-conservative evangelicalism on the issue of whether same-sex *attraction* is in itself sinful. There is a growing movement afoot that believes that, while homosexual *practice* is incompatible with faithful Christian profession, homosexual *orientation* is not necessarily sinful. Those who experience sexual desires for or attraction to members of the same sex do not necessarily need to put off those desires; but they instead must redirect those desires in some sort of lawful expression.

The Spiritual Friendship movement, spearheaded by Wesley Hill, and the Revoice Conference, led by Nate Collins, would be examples of this position. At the 2018 Revoice Conference, followers of Jesus were encouraged to embrace their identity as “Gay Christians”—even to the point of saying that they are in a “mixed-orientation marriage” with a member of the opposite sex—so long as their homosexual desires don't manifest in homosexual acts. Hill, who was a speaker at Revoice, counsels those who experience same-sex attraction to remain celibate but to channel the energies of their homosexual orientation into what he calls spiritual friendships. He says, “My sexuality, my basic erotic orientation to the world, is inescapably intertwined with how I go about finding and keeping friends. . . . I can harness and guide [my sexuality's] energies in the direction of sexually abstinent, yet intimate friendship.” So, don't set about to change your orientation; that's virtually impossible and potentially unhealthy to do. Instead, find biblically-permissible ways to express that orientation; not sexually, but emotionally in friendships.

Sam Allberry, an evangelical Anglican priest who speaks of himself as one who experiences same-sex attraction, has criticized the Revoice approach for defining oneself by their sexual desires. Contra Hill and Collins, Allberry says that professing Christians who experience same-sex attraction should not identify themselves as “gay.” Christians don’t define themselves by their struggles with sin, but by their union to Christ. This is a move in the right direction. However, up until recently, Allberry has allied himself with a ministry organization called “Living Out,” now led by a man named Ed Shaw. (Now, Allberry’s recent departure from Living Out is an encouraging sign, and so I don’t want to impute to him the positions of a ministry he has distanced himself from. But it wasn’t long ago that Allberry was a member of this organization, which is also currently endorsed by Tim Keller and has put on events at churches associated with the 9Marks ministry.)

But Living Out does not believe it is inherently sinful to experience attraction to the same sex. In fact, their website claims that “many same-sex attracted Christians are both happy in their sexuality and the Bible’s teaching on same-sex sexual relationships.” This obviously means that they don’t believe the Bible’s teaching on same-sex sexual relationships rules out same-sex attraction as sinful in itself. Same-sex attraction should not be mortified, and “attempting to change someone’s sexual orientation,” they say, can actually be “potentially damaging.” Such would be to “assume that being gay is somehow more problematic than being straight. We believe that heterosexuality as we encounter it in this world is just as fallen as homosexuality.”

And so you see the camps that take shape. There is the out-and-out liberal view that recognizes Scripture prohibits homosexuality but that Scripture should be rejected. There the revisionist view that attempts to make a biblical case for the compatibility of homosexual practice and Christianity. And we sort of recognize that both of those views are “out there.” Conservative evangelicalism is not imminently tempted to embrace one of those clearly unbiblical options. But then, contrary to the traditional Christian position that would identify both homosexual acts and homosexual desires as sins to be repented of, there is the camp that accepts Scripture’s condemnation of same-sex *behavior*, but denies that such a condemnation extends to same-sex *attraction*. And this position isn’t just held by people who are “out there.” Hill is a graduate of Wheaton College. Collins is a graduate of Southern Seminary. One advocate of the neutrality of same-sex attraction is an elder at Bethlehem Baptist Church and a contributor to the blog at Desiring God. So this is an in-house issue for us. And I’d be willing to bet that if we polled the room we’d find more disagreement than some of us might expect.

I believe that this question—the sinfulness or permissibility of same-sex attraction—is the watershed issue for conservative evangelical conviction on sexuality. We get that the Bible unmistakably condemns homosexual practice. We get that it’s unwise and contrary to our regeneration in Christ to define ourselves by our sinful inclinations; we reject the terminology of “gay Christian,” and the like. But evangelicalism seems to be split—or at best confused—over

whether (a) sexual attraction to members of the same sex is sinful in itself, or (b) same-sex attraction is neutral until it is acted upon. This seminar aims to answer that question: Is same-sex attraction sinful?

And the way evangelicalism answers this question is going to have far-reaching effects—not only on our doctrine of sanctification in general, but also on our ability uphold a consistent biblical sexual ethic in the face of so many hostile opponents in the culture. It’s my conviction that (1) same-sex attraction *is* indeed sin that must be repented of, that (2) we have a pastoral responsibility to labor with those who struggle with such desires to mortify and forsake them, and that (3) legitimizing same-sex attraction in any sense would be the breach in the dam that will lead to full-scale compromise on biblical sexuality. I hope in the remainder of the seminar to make that case to you from Scripture.

Pastoral Concern

Now, what ultimately drives us to have this discussion is our desire to glorify God in Christ by being faithful to His Word, and to see His holy standard for human sexual ethics be upheld in the midst of virulent attacks from the culture. The glory of God and the Lordship of Christ has to be our ultimate concern. But we’re also driven to have this discussion out of sincere pastoral concern for those who struggle with same-sex attraction. You see, part of the disagreement between faithful Christians on the sinfulness of same-sex attraction comes from a proper, compassionate desire to not place an undue burden on genuine followers of Christ, who, out of obedience to Him, discipline themselves to not engage in homosexual behavior, but who nevertheless experience enduring emotional and sexual attraction members of the same sex. In their immensely helpful book, [*Transforming Homosexuality*](#), Denny Burk and Heath Lambert put it quite well: “These dear brothers and sisters struggle faithfully and practice chastity, but they sense that they cannot eliminate same-sex attractions that well up within them spontaneously and uninvited. So it seems 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 load these brothers and sisters up with burdens too heavy for them to bear. And no one wants to sin against them and fall under the censure that Jesus laid against the scribes and Pharisees” (40).

Nevertheless, if same-sex attraction *is* itself sinful—if it is not merely homosexual behavior that is prohibited in Scripture, but also the desires and inclinations of the heart that lead to those behaviors—then making that case to our brothers and sisters struggling with same-sex attraction is not placing an undue burden on them. It is making God’s will known to them, and bringing the standard of holiness that is laid out for them in Scripture to bear on their lives—which is exactly what I need my brothers and sisters to do for me as we all make progress together in sanctification! If I’m convinced that some sin I’m committing isn’t in fact a sin, I’m likely not

going to focus very much on repenting from it. Why repent of it if it's not sinful? But if it *is* sinful, and I'm just convinced it's not, I'm going to continue in my unrepentant sin and cut myself off from the fellowship and communion with Christ that is enjoyed on the path of obedience, but which is hindered and obscured when sin is harbored and not confessed. So, by identifying sin as what it is, we give people hope—that they do not have to be enslaved to their sinful desires all their lives, but can find freedom and wholeness in Christ through the Gospel, and in His resurrection power for walking in newness of life.

Attraction, Desire, and Noticing

Another somewhat preliminary remark is to make sure that we know precisely what we mean when we speak of same-sex attraction. Someone who is same-sex attracted is someone who has enduring experiences of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual desires for members of the same sex. Those who have defended the neutrality of same-sex attraction have often argued for a distinction between attraction and desire. Matthew Anderson was a speaker at the Revoice Conference, and he puts it this way: “One thing which remains after the purification of same-sex sexual desires...is the complex set of noticings and attractions toward members of one's own sex.” So, even though same-sex *desires* are purified, same-sex *noticings* and *attractions* remain.

Because the Revoice Conference was held at a PCA church, the Central Carolina Presbytery of the PCA formed a committee to investigate the conference and report any relevant findings. Kevin DeYoung was a member of that committee. And in response to Anderson's point about desire, noticings, and attractions, the committee wrote [the following helpful assessment](#). They said, “While noticing is not the same as desire, it is hard to imagine how ‘attraction’ does not carry some sense of magnetic pull, arousal, or desire. By a simple dictionary definition, to notice is to observe or perceive, while attraction suggests interest and allurement. A mother may recognize that her teenage son is quite handsome or that her daughter has grown into an objectively beautiful woman. These noticings can take place apart from any sexual longing. But if a mother were to experience any *attraction* to her son or daughter, surely we would describe this kind of noticing as illicit, as a perverse response—however unbidden—that should be mortified at all costs. In short, while we distinguish between noticing and attraction, we do not see how attraction and desire are fundamentally different moral categories.” I think that's spot-on. To be attracted to someone is to desire that person in some way. To be *same-sex* attracted is to experience enduring emotional, romantic, and/or sexual *desires* for members of the same sex. And those desires—even if they arise in us somewhat unconsciously and are unwanted—are nevertheless sinful and must be mortified and repented of.

But why? Why is it that it's not enough to abstain from homosexual behavior? Why are homosexual desires and attractions sinful, and why must we counsel those who struggle with such desires and attractions to repent of them?

I. The Internal Nature of Sin and Holiness

Well, the first reason is because of **the fundamentally internal nature of sin and holiness**. Sin and holiness are matters of the heart, and cannot be reduced merely to external actions. Genuine, God-honoring, Christlike, Spirit-driven holiness is a matter of the thoughts, affections, and desires, not merely the actions. God does not merely command us to *behave* righteously; He commands us to *be* holy.

And we need to be overwhelmed with this truth—that the believer’s growth in holiness is a fundamentally **internal** matter. The emphasis on the heart, throughout the entirety of Scripture, speaks to our need to forsake sin and pursue holiness at the level of the heart, and not merely at the hands. Matthew 5:8, Jesus says, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” It’s not enough to clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside to be full of robbery and self-indulgence. It’s not enough to whitewash the tombs, but inside to be full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. What does Jesus say, “First clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also” (Matt 23:25–27).

In Matthew 18:35, the close of the parable of the unforgiving slave, Jesus tells us that the Father is not satisfied with hypocritical forgiveness. He says that the Father will cast us into hell to be tortured, “if each of you does not forgive his brother *from your heart*.”

The greatest commandment in the law, Matthew 22:37, is that we love the Lord our God with all our *heart*, with all our soul, and with all our mind.

When Simon seeks to buy the gift of the Holy Spirit with money, Peter rebukes him and tells him, in Acts 8:22: “Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, *the intention of your heart* may be forgiven you.” Simon didn’t need forgiveness merely for his attempted bribery. He needed forgiveness even for the intention of his heart!

And so when the Gospel releases us from our slavery to sin, how does Paul speak of redeemed believers? Romans 6:17: “But 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.” The slave of sin who has been made a slave of righteousness is one who becomes obedient from the heart, internally. Obedient not just outwardly but from the heart!

In Ephesians 6:5–6, Paul commands the slave to be obedient to their masters “*in the sincerity of your heart*, as to Christ; not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God *from the heart*.”

And that classic text on sanctification, Philippians 2:12–13, says, that God is working *in us*, *both* to will *and* to work for His good pleasure. So in progressive sanctification, God works in us not just to work, but also to will. He’s working even on our desires.

And so the desires of our flesh—the desires that characterized our old life of sin—they themselves are to be the object of our mortification. The New Testament testifies to that just as well. Galatians 5:24 says, “Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” The passions and desires of the flesh must be crucified! Titus 2:11–12: The grace of God instructs us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires. 1 Peter 2:11: “Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts—fleshly *desires*—which wage war against the soul.” And Colossians 3:5 says we are to “put to death what is earthly in us.” Not merely the external actions of “sexual immorality” and impurity, but also the internal affections of “passion,” “evil desire,” and “covetousness.”

And so, friends, holiness is not merely a matter of bringing our outward behavior into conformity to an external standard. Holiness does require holy behavior, but that’s not *all* it requires. The great Princeton theologian, Charles Hodge, puts it very helpfully. He says, “sanctification . . . does not consist exclusively in a series of a new kind of acts. It is the making the tree good, in order that the fruit may be good. It involves an essential change of character. [Just] as regeneration is . . . a new birth, a new creation, a quickening or communicating a new life, . . . so sanctification in its essential nature is not holy acts, but such a change in the state of the soul, that sinful acts become more infrequent, and holy acts more and more habitual and controlling” (*Systematic Theology*, 3:226). Sanctification is not merely new acts, but an essential change of the soul of man.

God is at work in us both to will *and* to work. And so the sanctification that we must press after—and lead our people to press after—is both internal and external. We must have sanctified affections as well as sanctified actions—because God has not simply commanded us to carry out a series of external duties. He has also commanded us to have a particular frame of heart as we do those external duties. Call them “internal duties,” if you like. And so Micah 6:8 commands us not merely to *do* justly, but also to *love* mercy. In 1 Peter 5:2, pastors and elders are commanded not merely to shepherd the flock of God, but to shepherd the flock of God *willingly* and *eagerly*. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 9:7 that God loves a *cheerful* giver. So if God loves a *cheerful* giver, and you give begrudgingly without cheerfulness, have you obeyed? Well, you have obeyed the command to *give*, but you have not obeyed the command to give *cheerfully*.

So you see, God commands our affections as well as our actions. This means that the truly holy person doesn’t merely “do what God commands,” though he certainly does that. But it goes deeper than that. The holy person loves what God loves! He desires what God desires! He is attracted to what God is attracted to! And then he acts in keeping with that renewed heart.

Now, to suggest that homosexual desires or same-sex attraction is not itself a sin to be mortified, but that one faithfully follows Christ in holiness so long as he doesn't act on those desires, is entirely out of accord with everything we have just read. It is *not* making the tree good, as Hodge says. It is simply chopping off the rotten fruit. It's allowing—and in some cases even encouraging—sin to continue to draw life from the soil of wickedness. But we are not to battle sin merely at the level of its fruit. We are to lay the axe at the *root* of the tree. We're to cut sin out at the root level of the desires of our heart. What does Jesus say in Mark 7:21? “For from *within*, out of the *heart* of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries,” and so on. Sinful acts are rooted in the heart, in the affections, in the desires. It is the desires that produce the behaviors!

This is the Sermon on the Mount, isn't it? In Matthew 5:27, Jesus quotes directly from the Septuagint's translation of the Seventh Commandment in Exodus 20:14: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’” There is a comment about sexually immoral behavior. But then in verse 28, Jesus immediately follows his quotation of the Seventh Commandment with a citation from the Tenth Commandment. “But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her”—literally, to desire her—“has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” The term translated “lust” is *epithumeō*, from the Greek translation of Exodus 20:17, “You shall not covet”—*epithumeō*—“your neighbor's wife.” Jesus is inextricably linking the pre-behavioral sexual desire for a woman with the sinful act of adultery. God's law doesn't merely prohibit the acts of adultery and stealing; it prohibits the covetous and lustful desires that lead to those acts.

And friends, the extent to which we disconnect same-sex *attraction* from same-sex *behavior*—by suggesting that the latter is prohibited but the former is permissible—is the same extent to which we will turn biblical sanctification in to mere behavior modification (cf. [Burk & Lambert](#), 79). It is the extent to which we wholly externalize the concepts of sin and holiness.

And yet Scripture tells us that sin is not merely what we *do* but who we *are*. Sin is not merely our transgression of external laws; it is the condition of our souls. We are not sinners because we sin, but we sin because we are sinners. The fact that our sinful desires seem to spring from within us so naturally—the fact that we seem naturally oriented to be attracted to a particular set of sinful behaviors—only *increases* our culpability. It only testifies to our corruption. “I'm *inclined* this way! This feels *natural*! This is *who I am*!” Exactly! When I'm tempted, the fact that I find those temptations so enticing and attractive only means my sin problem is worse than I thought! It reaches deeper than my hands into my heart—into the very core of my being! And so because our sinful acts are rooted in and spring out from our sinful hearts, biblical sanctification requires more than repentance at the level of our behavior but at the level of the desires and inclinations and attractions that produce those behaviors.

And so John Murray, longtime Professor of Theology at Westminster Seminary, said, “The outward act of transgression ... [is] determined by inclination, propension, character. ... The character that produce[s] the act cannot be different as to its moral character from the act itself” (2:69). In other words, it is sin to be attracted to what is sinful. The desire for an illicit end is itself an illicit desire (cf. [CCP](#), 6). It is an indication that, whatever my *actions* may be, my *affections* are still sinful. I still want something which my Father has told me is not for me to have! I may know it’s wrong to act on that desire, and by God’s grace I may restrain myself from acting upon it. But I still want something—I’m still attracted to something—which does not give me more of my Father, which does not lead me to enjoy more of His glory, and therefore which cannot satisfy the longings of my soul, but can only deceive (Eph 4:22), corrupt (2 Pet 2:10), and plunge me into ruin and destruction (1 Tim 6:9). Even to *desire* those things—to seek satisfaction in things which are not my God nor from my God—is *evil* desire. It is idolatry. It is sin. And it must be repented of.

II. Concupiscence

Now, I don’t have time for this, but those of you interested in this issue should read all you can on the historical debate between the Roman Catholic and the Reformed doctrine of **concupiscence**. Concupiscence speaks of involuntary desires that have been disordered by sin. Interestingly, Roman Catholic theology holds that concupiscence is not sinful, while Reformed theology has always held that it *is* sinful.

And like I said, I don’t have time for this, and so I’m just going to read a summary paragraph of the history from the [Central Carolina Presbytery’s report on the Revoice Conference](#). They write: “How we describe our involuntary, disordered desires is a major difference between a Roman Catholic understanding of sin and a Reformed understanding of sin. According to the Catholic Catechism, the ‘inclination to sin that Tradition calls concupiscence’ is ‘left for us to wrestle with,’ but ‘it cannot harm those who do not consent’ [CCC, NY: Doubleday, 1995, 1264]. Elsewhere, the Catechism explains that ‘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’ [Ibid., 2515]. In other words, disordered desire, though a result of the Fall, does not become sin apart from a consenting act of the will. The Reformed tradition has uniformly disagreed with this understanding of concupiscence. ‘The Reformation,’ writes Bavinck, ‘spoke out against that position, asserting that also the impure thoughts and desires that arose in us prior to and apart from our will are sin’ [3:143]. Calvin explicitly teaches these ‘inordinate desires’ (*concupiscentiis*) should be called not merely ‘weakness’ but ‘sin.’ ‘We label “sin,”’ he writes, ‘that very depravity which begets in us desires of this sort. We accordingly teach that in the saints, until they are divested of mortal bodies, there is always sin; for in their flesh there resides

the depravity of inordinate desiring which contends against righteousness' [*Institutes*, 3.3.10]" (CCP, 7).

Now, history is not a hermeneutic. Truth is not established by whether our heroes taught it or whether heretics taught against it. But nevertheless, I do find it interesting that, historically speaking, proponents of the neutrality of same-sex attraction are basically practicing a fundamentally Romanist and anti-Reformed hamartiology, explicitly in opposition to the Reformers whom they would regard as their own theological forbears.

III. On Sin and Temptation

Now, as I discuss the nature of temptation and the sinfulness of same-sex attraction, the principal objection I receive is that simply *experiencing* temptation itself cannot be sinful, because the Lord Jesus was tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin, as Hebrews 4:15 says. "To be attracted to sin," they say, "is precisely what it means to be *tempted* to sin. By saying same-sex attraction is sinful, aren't you saying that people sin simply by virtue of being tempted? And in that case, do you not undermine the sinlessness of Christ, who was tempted?"

This is an important objection, and it must be answered. In fact, I think a proper understanding of sin and temptation is the crux of this debate. This objection conflates two kinds of temptation—or at least two ways the Scriptures speak about temptation; namely, what we might call *external* temptation and *internal* temptation. External temptation is temptation that is experienced entirely from without. It is an external solicitation to sin. External temptation is what Jesus experienced in Matthew 4 and Luke 4, when Satan tempted Him to turn stones into bread, to fall down and worship him, and to throw Himself from the cliff to prove He was the Son of God. It was not sin for Jesus to be the object of Satan's temptations.

So for example, if someone comes up to me and says, "Mike! Look at that girl over there! She's got barely anything on!" that person—external to me—is tempting me to sin. But if such an external temptation finds no place in my affections—if there are no "hooks" in my heart that dispose me to yield to that temptation, if, by God's grace, I were so satisfied in Christ and the communion with Him that I enjoy on the path of obedience that the path of disobedience looks utterly repulsive and has no pull on my affections, and my delight in the glory of the Lord was such that that kind of temptation is lost on me—I have not sinned. And so it is not my position that all temptation is sinful. To be tempted externally is not in itself sinful.

But to be tempted *internally* is what James talks about in James 1:14 when he says, "But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust." Internal temptation is a temptation that arises from within my own sinful heart, and is owing to the fact that my affections and desires and inclinations and attractions are still sinful—that I still want those

things which my Father has told me are not for me to have, which, as we said before, do not lead me to enjoy His glory in greater measure, and therefore which cannot satisfy my soul. For me to desire those things—for me to find alluring and attractive and satisfying those things which exchange the truth of God for a lie—is to commit idolatry.

And so, in this same scenario where someone comes and urges me to look at an immodestly dressed woman, if there *were* hooks in my heart, if the external temptation combines with my own evil desires to gratify the lust of my eyes—even if I didn't actually turn around and ogle that woman—I have still sinned in my heart. I have still desired that for which there is no lawful expression—that which the Lord has told me is not mine to have. And I need to repent of that desire and aim to mortify it in such a way that, if I were presented with that kind of external temptation again, my heart will be in such a frame as to have no “hooks” for that temptation.

And so the reason that it was not sin for Jesus to be tempted in the wilderness is not merely because He never performed the *acts* that Satan urged Him to perform. It was because Christ never even *desired* to perform them! In other words, Satan's *external* temptation never passed into *internal* temptation in Jesus' heart. Because Jesus was sinless—because He had no sin nature, because, as He Himself said in John 14:30, “the ruler of this world ... has nothing in Me”—there was nothing in His sinless nature that could have produced even a *desire* for evil. And that means that whatever temptations Jesus faced were *external* temptations. If there were any “hooks” in Jesus' heart onto which sin could latch—if in the wilderness He thought, “Oh, I would so love to demonstrate My power and glory as the eternal Son apart from My Father's plan,”—He would have desired what His Father said was not for Him to desire, and He would have become a transgressor. He would not have loved God with *all* His heart, soul, mind, and strength.

In our case, Galatians 5:17, the Spirit sets His desire against the flesh. There is a war being waged within our members, Romans 7:23. But with Jesus, who came in the *likeness* of sinful flesh, Romans 8:3, but who had no genuinely sinful flesh, there *was* no internal war! He not only *performed* righteousness; He *loved* and *desired* righteousness! At every moment! He never desired to do anything but the will of His Father. John 4:34: “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work.” John 5:19: “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner.” Christ was holy in His affections as well as His actions. To not be so would have undermined His sinlessness. And so John Owen says, “There is something in...our temptations more than was in the temptation of Christ. There is something in ourselves to take part with every temptation; and there is enough in ourselves to tempt us, though nothing else should appear against us. With Christ it was not so, John 14:30”—“the ruler of this world has nothing in Me” (2:143). And so, Jesus was tempted, externally, like we are; yet without sin, and thus not tempted internally.

Owen explains this distinction between internal and external temptation well in *The Nature and Power of Indwelling Sin*. He says, “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: *Epithumei*—‘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.” And here’s the key: “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” (6:194). The proposal of temptation from within the heart of man is the soul’s own act! And therefore it is sin. The “temptation” of same-sex attraction is an internal temptation. It is to be carried away and enticed by one’s *own* desire. And therefore it is sin.

Now someone will say, “You quoted James 1 a couple of times. But doesn’t the progression of thought in James 1:13–15 *distinguish* sin from desire? James says, ‘Each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust,’ or desire. ‘Then when [desire] has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.’ You’re saying the desire *is* sin, but James says the desire *leads* to sin!” This is another good objection, and one that needs to be answered.

And the answer comes in the New Testament usage of the term *hamartia*, the word for “sin,” which it uses in at least two distinct senses. Some texts speak of sin as a reference to particular sinful deeds or behaviors. The Prodigal Son returns to his father and says, “Father, I have sinned” (Luke 15:18). But in other texts, sin refers to that principle of sin—or condition of sin, or inclination to sin—that resides in the heart. This is that “law of sin” in the members of my body which wages war against the “law of my mind,” Romans 7:23. So the term can be used in both ways. Interestingly, of the seven times James uses the word in his letter, every other occurrence is a clear reference to sinful deeds. James 2:9: “But if you show partiality, you are *committing sin*.” Chapter 5 verse 16: “Confess your *sins* to one another,” and so on (cf. 4:8, 17; 5:13, 15, 20). Given James’s usage of the word in the rest of the letter, coupled with the New Testament’s teaching on the fundamentally internal nature of sin and holiness that we saw earlier, I believe we are constrained to interpret “sin” in James 1:15 to refer to the commission of sinful *acts* (cf. [Burk & Lambert](#), 54).

Calvin agrees. In his commentary on this passage, he explicitly distinguishes his view from the Roman Catholic doctrine of concupiscence. He writes, “It seems, however, improper, and not according to the usage of Scripture, to restrict the word sin to outward works, as though indeed lust itself were not a sin, and as though corrupt desires, remaining closed up within and suppressed, were not so many sins. But as the use of a word is various, there is nothing unreasonable if it be taken here, as in many other places, for actual sin. And the Papists

ignorantly lay hold on this passage, and seek to prove from it that vicious, yea, filthy, wicked, and the most abominable lusts are not sins, provided there is no assent; for James does not shew when sin *begins to be born*, so as to be sin, and so accounted by God, but when it *breaks forth*” (290). The Central Carolina Presbytery gives helpful comments on that passage in Calvin. They say, “For Calvin, there is *indwelling* sin (the temptations caused by desire in v. 14b), *actual* sin (the birth of sin in v. 15a), and...“*perfected*” sin (the deadly fully grown sin in v. 15b). When James talks about temptations leading to sin, he does not mean that the temptation (in this case) is itself morally neutral. ... The one who is experiencing temptation caused by his own desire (*epithumias*) is already experiencing the reality of indwelling sin, though that indwelling sin (in the Christian) can be resisted so as not to give birth to actual (i.e., acted upon) sin. ... [The] process [outlined in James 1:14–15] is not one that moves from innocence to sin, but rather one that sees indwelling sin move from the *mind* to the *affections* to the *will* and finally to the outward *working* of sin in the life (and death) of a person” (CCP, 8, 9).

James is simply saying that sinful desire gives birth to sinful acts. But it just doesn’t follow that the “desire” he speaks about is morally neutral. He says it lures and entices the sinner away from faithfulness and into disobedience. That’s why the NAS translates *epithumia* as “lust,” here: because it’s plain from the context that there is a *sinful* character to this desire. And so this objection from James 1, while initially plausible, turns out not only to fail to establish the neutrality of desire but upon closer examination actually establishes the *sinfulness* of desire.

Conclusion

That is what covetousness is: it is a desire for anything that you cannot righteously have—a desire that has no lawful expression. Sexual attraction to members of the same sex fits that very definition precisely. Some people will say, “Well hey, it’s not a sin for a man to find a *woman* attractive, so long as it doesn’t pass into lustful desire. Why can’t it be the same for a man finding *men* attractive?” Well, again, as we said at the beginning, same-sex attraction goes beyond noticing that someone is objectively good-looking. But the answer is: heterosexual desire and homosexual desire are different things. The morality of a desire is determined by its object. It’s not a matter of intensity, or of chosenness; it’s a matter of the thing desired. The object of heterosexual desire may be lawfully expressed within the covenant of marriage. But the object of homosexual desire cannot be lawfully expressed. And a desire which for which there is no lawful expression is the definition of covetousness. It is the very evil desire which Colossians 3:5 commands us to regard as dead to us, and which verse 6 says brings about the wrath of God upon unbelievers.

Now, I want you to hear me. I don’t want to be misunderstood. I am not saying that anyone who struggles with same-sex attraction is excluded from salvation, must not be a Christian, or even that they must pursue experiencing opposite-sex sexual desires. But they *must* be exhorted to put

off their sinful affections—just like someone who finds themselves particularly susceptible to the temptations of indulging desires for fornication, or adultery, or drunkenness, or acts of violence.

Phil Johnson tells a story that occurred in his first year at Grace to You. He says, “A man wrote our ministry looking for affirmation and encouragement. He wanted us to agree with his belief that mere *attraction* to a forbidden object is not inherently sinful. He gave a convincing testimony about his conversion from a life of sin and rebellion. He said he was now serving as an AWANA leader in his church. Then he got specific about what he was asking us to sanction. He said he felt sexually drawn to ‘large farm animals.’ (Those were his exact words.)” Do you tell that man that his attractions are morally neutral, so long as he doesn’t act on them? What about the man who, for as long as he can remember, has been marked by a sexual attraction to young children? Do we tell that man to *befriend* children for the purpose of finding an appropriate expression for his forbidden desires? No! We tell them both to put to death such evil desires, because they themselves are sinful!

If someone finds that he has a natural inclination or orientation to be pugnacious—a “striker” in the literal sense—we don’t teach “violence-attracted Christians” to go to conferences where they learn to “be happy with” their orientation *and* Scripture’s teaching on anger and violence! We teach them to confess such inclinations and attractions as sinful, to put them to death by the Spirit, and to walk in accordance with the Gospel by which they are saved. Instead of giving the hope of freedom from bondage to believers who struggle with same-sex attraction, the perspective endorsed by Collins and Revoice and Living Out defines the problem away.

But we have so much better news than, “You’re stuck. You’re going to have to learn to manage this.” We have a Gospel of sovereign grace that brings genuine, *reorienting* freedom in Christ through His Gospel! Yes, friends, we are constrained by Scripture to confess that same-sex attraction *is* itself sinful. But we are constrained by the *same* Scriptures to declare that Christ has come to save sinners! And not only to *justify* them on the basis of His own perfect obedience, but also to *sanctify* them by the exertion of the same power that raised Him from the dead. Resurrection power is at work for the sanctification of those who trust in Christ!

And so while it would be unwise to promise or to expect immediate change, or that one day Jesus is just going to *zap*-sanctify you from any trace of struggles with same-sex desires (just as it would be for any *other* sinful desire), nevertheless, we can have great hope! We should not regard sexual “orientation” as immutable. We should regard it as an area of our lives over which Christ our King exerts His Lordship, and we should trust Him to do far more abundantly beyond all that we can ask or think through the means of grace which He has appointed for our sanctification.

And one last word. We ought to worship Jesus Christ, our great Captain of salvation, our Champion of perfect righteousness, who never sinned by having sinful sexual desires. Think of it! A man like us, tempted as we are, yet *without* sin—whether in hand or in heart—perfectly pure! Your Lord walked as a man on this earth, and He never took advantage of someone with a lustful glance! He never viewed others as an occasion for His own gratification! He always interacted with His neighbors in perfect purity! He always lived for their benefit, and never once sought to use anyone for His own illicit gain! What a Man! What a Savior! O, how I want to be a man like Him!

And praise God that where I have failed, He has succeeded. Where I have sinned, He has obeyed. And He freely credits that real-life, lived-out, perfect life of obedience to me—and to all who come to Him in repentant faith. The contemplation of that glory of Jesus by faith is what transforms us into the same image from glory to glory (2 Cor 3:18). May we look to Him, and point others to Him—no matter *what* their sin-struggle—so that Christ may get what He is worthy of, “until all the ransomed church of God be [saved to sin no more](#).”