

Social Issues Committee

Briefing Paper: Same Sex Attraction and Pastoral Responses

A new person starts coming to Church. Over time you see the gospel starting to make more and more sense to them until finally, by God's grace, they come to a true and saving faith in Jesus. You want to assure them that, like the prodigal son, they have truly been welcomed home and that nothing in their past is beyond the forgiveness that Jesus offers. Yet, you also want to make clear that they stand at the beginning of a journey, one on which God will be making them more Christ-like. But what kind of changes should we expect?

In particular, how do we answer this question for the person who is same-sex attracted? The Bible is clear that sexual activity only honours God within the marriage of one man and one woman. But in what ways should we expect the gospel to transform someone's desires when what they desire is not God's revealed will for them? And how should we minister to those among us for whom this is a deeply felt, personal reality?

A lot of ink has been spilled in recent years as godly thinkers have tried to answer this question. At one end of the spectrum, some argue that we should expect God to totally remove any sexual desire that is contrary to his will. Trevor Hunter, for example, claims that, "It seems impossible to believe that if a Christian seeks God's grace to turn away from a dimension of their life which has been a significant stumbling block that God will not be in their decision."¹ On the other end, authors such as David Bennett believe that while God is able to remove any same-sex desire, "Very few same-sex-attracted or gay people report that when they become Christians, their desires simply disappear"² and that God's grace is normally seen in empowering individuals to live a life of celibacy. Of course, you can also find plenty of others who lay between these two extremes!

¹ Keane, *What Some of You Were*. 150.

² Bennett, *A War of Loves*, 112.

Interestingly, the passage that almost everyone bases their conclusions upon is 1 Corinthians 6:11, which reads.

“That is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”

So what can we say about 1 Corinthians 6?

1 Corinthians 6 focuses on physical actions rather than internal thoughts, motivations or desires. In 6:1-8, Paul addresses not how the Corinthians might think or feel about having been wronged, but rather the inappropriateness of addressing wrongs through civil lawsuits. Likewise, 6:12-20 addresses sexual immorality, not by addressing an underlying problem of lust, but from the perspective of its physical implications. This is not to say our internal motivations and desires are unimportant, only that these are not Paul’s focus in this instance. In 6:9-10, Paul lists ten nouns, with each representing the person whose life is characterised by that particular behaviour and is, therefore, unrighteous before God. Two of these words address homosexuality. The NIV translates the words “sexually immoral”³ and “men who have sex with men,”⁴ both describing a physical action.

In 6:11, we find that Paul declares, “And that is what some of you were,” indicating that what had once characterised these believers no longer does. Three verbs, each attributed to the work of God’s Spirit, describe the change. First, we have been “washed,” that is to say, the dirtiness of sin has been removed from us. Second, we have been “sanctified.” This is not to say we are made morally perfect, but that we are given a status as ‘set apart’ to serve God. That this is Paul’s meaning becomes clear when we consider that despite the long list of moral failings Paul addresses in this letter, he can still address these believers as saints (1:2)! Third, we have been

³ BDAG, ἀρσενικοίτης, ου, ό. “A male who engages in sexual activity w. a person of his own sex, pederast”

⁴ BDAG, μαλακός, ή, όν. “Being passive in a same-sex relationship.”

made “righteous”. In 6:9, those excluded from the kingdom are those who, by their actions, have made themselves unrighteous. But God has acted to undo the result of their actions and bestow a new status in which they were made acceptable to him and stood to inherit God’s kingdom.

From these brief observations, four significant conclusions may be drawn concerning Paul’s meaning:

1. Paul’s argument is focused on homosexual acts, rather than on what might be considered orientation or desire.
2. That salvation confers a standing on the believer, which frees them from God’s judgement upon these acts.
3. That Paul envisages this status will necessarily display itself in a changed way of life. Indeed, Paul includes these verses as a rationale for encouraging the Corinthians to avoid certain behaviours and pursue others that are appropriate to the status they have received.
4. Yet, while God has empowered his people to not act upon their sinful desires, whatever they may be, Paul does not hold out the promise that moral perfection will be attained in this life, nor that the same-sex desires themselves will necessarily be reoriented.

So how do Paul’s words help us think about the new Christian?

First, we need to remember that all of us live between two ages. While God has saved us, he will not make ANY of us perfect until we enter his heaven. This will be as true for the same-sex attracted person as it is for the heterosexual who struggles with sinful lust or the person whose biggest sin struggles are not in the area of sexuality. (and let’s not forget that Paul names 8 sins that have nothing to do with homosexuality and which ensure that all of us have appeared on this list at some point). This is why Paul can speak of both the present status of believers as accepted by God, as well as the reality that we experience the temptation to sin. Both are true!

While Paul calls these believers to live in a manner appropriate to their God-given status, he acknowledges that in this life, that will not mean sinless perfection. Nor does he hold out the promise that the temptation toward any particular sin will necessarily be reordered.

Second, we must remember that the opposite of homosexuality is not heterosexuality but holiness! After all, there are plenty of ways to sin heterosexually as well. All of us need to know that we are called to resist temptation in whatever form it comes and pursue holiness. Remembering this offers a framework in which the believer may seek to live faithfully while they await heaven, whether or not God changes their sexual desires. For instance, holiness might play out in a life of celibacy, as a person denies their sexual desires in an effort to live faithfully.

Third, we cannot deny, as Wayne Grudem reminds us, that God desires purity of heart as well as of action. Indeed, the Scriptures are clear not only that sinful actions spring from sinful internal desires (Mark 7:20-23, Proverbs 4:23) but that these thoughts have the nature of sin (Matt 5:27-30) and God intends for these internal desires to be transformed (Rom 12:2, Col 3:1-2). As such, affirming Paul's confidence that the Corinthian believers will experience a measure of victory over sin must include the possibility that some will experience this in the form of changed sexual desire.

A way forward

So how do we care for the same-sex attracted believer whom God has placed among us?

First, we need to not assume what God might or might not do. The world around us might tell us that our sexual desires are an unchangeable and irresistible part of who we are. But we know that God can change people at the deepest level. Indeed, I'm sure you have profound examples of the change that God has brought about in your life. One scholar, Robert Gagnon, cites research that claims treatments are successful in some measure in 28.8% of cases. This is not an insubstantial number,

and we must not assume that God cannot or will not act to change the hearts of those we minister to. The last thing we should want to do is rob people of the hope that the gospel can transform this or any other area of their lives.

Second, we must also keep in mind that, as can be seen from 1 Corinthians 6, the possibility that God might change someone's sexual desire is not the same as a guarantee that this change will occur on this side of eternity. As Gagnon notes, "When the apostle Paul referred to warfare between the flesh and the Spirit in the Christian life, he spoke optimistically of the Christian's ability to "walk" or behave in accordance with the wishes of the indwelling Spirit. Yet even that victory presupposes an ongoing struggle with sinful desires."⁵ We must be careful not to insist on a change that God himself has not promised. Doing so risks either filling those for whom Christ has died with false hope or causing them to despair.

Third, as in any pastoral situation, we have to understand that we are talking with real people and that all people are different. The person who experiences same-sex attraction and chooses the path of celibacy will have very different challenges from the person who seeks out treatments to change their desires. Indeed, two people who chose the same path will likely experience different struggles based on a range of factors that are particular to each of them. We must be willing to acknowledge that each person will be different and that the application of our theology will require us to be patient, gracious and wise. Only within the Church family will this be possible. It is as we walk together that we can seek to know those whom God has brought among us, and, praying for God's wisdom, we can spur one another on to live as Christ has called us to live.

Fourth, we must keep our eyes fixed on heaven. David Bennett reminds us that "homosexuality is a momentary desire. It will soon pass away with God's new creation in Jesus Christ."⁶ Of course, this is equally true of any sin that any one of us might

⁵ Robert A. J. Gagnon. *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 429.

⁶ Bennett, *A War of Loves*, 229.

struggle with. The struggle with sin in this life will always be hard. Resisting temptation will be costly and painful. But let's never forget Paul's encouragement that "our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18). Whatever our struggles, God promises something far better for those who stick with Jesus.

And finally, as we wait for heaven and bear with one another through all the messiness and tears of life in this broken world, we must follow Paul's lead and understand that there is a world of difference between the person whose life is characterised by their sin, and those whose lives are characterised by following Christ, yet who struggle against sin. Recognising this, we can continue to hold out the great truth that "Christians are not promised an end to sexual temptation in its various forms. They are given an anchor of hope that those who endure to the end will be saved."⁷

⁷ Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 429.