



**Anglican Diocese of Armidale Social Issues Committee
Briefing Paper: Is the desire for same-sex activity sinful?**

What is the real question?

When discussing the bible's view of homosexuality, it is common to hear people distinguish between desires and physical acts. It is clear that the Bible places homosexual activity outside of God's revealed will for his people.¹ However, a biblical evaluation of the experience of homosexual desires is more difficult. Are these desires themselves sinful? Are they a misdirection of a good and God-given desire for sexual intimacy? Or are they merely temptations? Is any talk of sin only appropriate to the extent that these temptations are either resisted or fallen into?

At the outset, we must note that the topic before us is not homosexuality specifically. Instead, this is a discussion about *concupiscence*, a topic that speaks to the effects of sin upon human desire more generally. As such, what follows can equally be applied to how sin impacts all sexual desires, whether heterosexual or homosexual, as well as our non-sexual passions and desires.

The Cultural Challenge.

One of the difficulties we experience in considering this topic is that, at present, our culture teaches us to understand our desires in a particular manner. In some sense, how we feel and what we desire are thought to reflect the deepest and most authentic version of ourselves. Few things are seen as more important than reaching deep inside ourselves to find who we truly are and shaping our lives to embrace and

¹ See Lev 18:22; 20:13; Rom 1:25-27; 1 Cor 6:9-11; 1 Tim 1:9-10; Jude 6-7.

express what we find inside. In doing this, we are thought to live as the most authentic version of ourselves. And since what comes naturally is good (so long as I am not hurting anyone), and since we celebrate those who live authentically, the greatest ‘sin’ someone can commit is to deny or suppress the reality of their true self.

Those who profess faith in Jesus are not immune to this way of thinking. It is common to hear people claim that since God doesn’t make mistakes, and since he “made me this way,” then my innate desires must be good. For example, after publicly identifying as a woman, Bruce/Caitlyn Jenner said that “I had a lot of conversations with my family, my close friends, with my pastor, with God, and kind of came to a revelation that maybe I should be honest with myself about who I am and let that person - this woman who has lived inside me for my entire life - finally have an opportunity to live.” This implication is clear. We must be free to live out the deep feelings and desires hidden within us. However, such a claim is inconsistent with the Christian doctrine of concupiscence.

The Christian doctrine of concupiscence.

Concupiscence (from the Latin *concupiscentia*) is “an ardent, usually sensual, longing.” During the Reformation, the Latin term found continued use within English theological discourse. For example, Anglican Article IX declares that “although there is no condemnation for them that believe and are baptized, yet the Apostle doth confess that concupiscence and lust hath itself the nature of sin.” Early English Bibles often used concupiscence to translate the Greek word ‘*epithumia*.’ While the term has disappeared from modern translations, which generally render *epithumia* as ‘passion’ or ‘desire’, we may note that there are nine occurrences of concupiscence in the Douay-Rheims Bible² and three occurrences in the King James Bible.³

² Wis 4:12; Rom 7:7-8; Col 3:5; Jas 1:14-15; 2 Pet 1:4; 1 John 2:17.

³ Rom 7:8; Col 3:5; 1 Thess 4:5.

Zacharias Ursinus helpfully defines concupiscence as “an inordinate desire or corrupt inclination, coveting those things which God has forbidden” This definition reflects a common Reformation view of Original Sin as a corruption of all aspects of human nature, including our desires. Article IX makes this point,⁴ as does John Calvin in saying of original sin, 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.”⁵ Matthew 5:27-28 highlights that desires can be sinful when it records Jesus’ statement that looking lustfully (literally with *epithumia*) is to commit the sin of adultery, even though the physical act has not occurred. As such, we can say that concupiscence springs from sin, resulting from the corruption of our nature. Concupiscence is an inclination toward sin, as its object is what God has forbidden. And it has the nature of sin inasmuch as it brings “eternal death upon those not born again through Baptism and the Holy Ghost.”⁶

How to think about Concupiscence biblically.

Paul’s letter to the Romans will help us better understand the effects of concupiscence and how we might think about it in light of the gospel. Before reading this section, it is worth reading Romans 1-8 as there is a level of detail there that we will not have time to explore in this paper.

4 Article XI states: “Original sin standeth not in the following of Adam (as the Pelagians do vainly talk), but it is the fault and corruption of the nature of every man that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam, whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and is of his own nature inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusteth always contrary to the spirit; and therefore in every person born into this world, it deserveth God’s wrath and damnation. And this infection of nature doth remain, yea, in them that are regenerated, whereby the lust of the flesh, called in Greek *phronema sarkos* (which some do expound the wisdom, some sensuality, some the affection, some the desire of the flesh), is not subject to the law of God. And although there is no condemnation for them that believe and are baptized, yet the Apostle doth confess that concupiscence and lust hath itself the nature of sin.”

5 Calvin Institutes 2.1.8.

6 See “The Augsburg Confession: Article II. Of Original Sin”

In Romans 5-8, Paul unpacks how Christ's work, as outlined in chapters 1-4, shapes how Christians are to live. In Romans 5:12-21, Paul explains that the original sin of Adam was not merely an individual transgression but that through it, sin and condemnation entered the world and came to all people. Although Christ's salvific work promises forgiveness to all who turn to Jesus, Romans 6-7 is clear that our salvation does not equate to immediate perfection for the believer. These chapters vividly display some of the challenges of living between what is often described as the "now but not yet". While forgiveness is secure in Christ, and we have been definitively moved from the condemnation resulting from Adam's sin into the salvation won by Christ, believers will not be rendered sinless while still on this side of heaven. Thus the Christian life is one of resisting temptation and striving for holiness. As Paul most strikingly explains in 7:14-25, this is a war fought within each of us, even at the level of desires. Even one so strident as Paul recognises that the effect of sin remains with him in such a way that he cannot overcome them by his own efforts.

While Paul's view of sinful human nature may seem incredibly pessimistic, his view of God's mercy is anything but! The account of Paul's personal struggle is met in 7:24-25 with the hopeful outburst, "Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!" He further affirms in 8:1 that "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Indeed, Paul's supreme hope spills out throughout Romans 8. Various, God has done in Christ what the Mosaic law could not (8:2-4), moved us from the realm of flesh to the realm of the Spirit in which we find life for our mortal bodies (8:5-11) and given us the Spirit of adoption and made us co-heirs of heaven with Christ (8:14-17). Further, the Holy Spirit sustains us in our weakness, even interceding with God for us in our struggles (8:22-27) as God works all things toward our eternal good (8:28-30), a good work of God that absolutely nothing can or will put an end to (8:31-39).

Pastoral implications.

In light of these brief observations concerning Paul's letter to the Romans and the historic Reformation views of concupiscence, what can we say about the experience of same-sex sexual desires?

First, we have seen that as a theological term, concupiscence refers to the inclination fallen human beings have toward sin. We must remember that none of us possesses uncorrupted, pure desires. This includes the realm of our sexual desires. Since scripture clearly places same-sex sexual activity outside God's revealed will for sex, such desires spring from our corrupted nature. For this reason, we cannot imagine that such desires represent our best, truest or most authentic selves. They are a distortion of the person God created us to be and the person He promises that we will be when we see Him face to face.

Secondly, when ministering to those who experience same-sex desires, we must differentiate between what the Bible says about temptation, concupiscence and actual acts of sin. James 1:14-15 tells us, "*Each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.*" Temptation is not in itself a sin. After all, we are told that Jesus was tempted in every way that we are but was himself sinless (Heb 4:15). Even when calling our desires evil (concupiscence), James stops short of saying that we are condemned for them. We can further notice that for all of Paul's struggles with his sinful nature in Romans 5-8, he is confident that there is no condemnation awaiting him. However, it is the indulgence of sinful desires that leads to death. We can see a parallel with 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 in which Paul lists ten sins that, if embraced, will put the offender outside the kingdom of God. Thus when ministering to anyone struggling with their sinful nature, we should be clear that the persistence of sinful desires, including same-sex sexual desire, does not bring condemnation upon those who genuinely have turned to Christ, confessed their sin and long to live in obedience to Jesus as Lord. However, when that person actively embraces, rather than resisting, the temptation which springs from sinful desires, they place themselves outside of Christ Jesus and

will face God's condemnation. In light of these observations, one very practical and helpful practice we could all adopt is to make the words of our Anglican Communion service our own. There we not only pray that God would "lead us not into temptation," as per the Lord's Prayer. We ask the one "to whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hidden" to "cleanse the thoughts of our hearts" so that we may "perfectly love" Him. We also beg God's mercy for sinning against him in "thought, word and deed" and are comforted with the assurance of God's promise that all who pray this in true faith will be heard and forgiven by God.

Finally, the most important implication of what we have seen regarding concupiscence is that considering this doctrine should drive us to the foot of the cross. Our desires are disordered by the effect of the fall. Each one of us will not only desire what God has forbidden, but we will also often want God's good gifts on our terms rather than his. How this disordering of desires manifests in the lives of each individual will be different. What is common is that all of us are in some way impacted, and none of us can atone for ourselves or reorder our desires. Yet God has helped us in our helplessness. Realising this, we must entrust ourselves to the one who gave himself for our forgiveness, who promises to begin a work of changing every aspect of our created being, and who has promised to lose none of those who are his. We cannot expect perfection in this life, either of ourselves or others. Nor can we expect that the desire for any particular sin is guaranteed to dissolve the moment we profess Christ as Lord. But amid our struggles, we can still be sure of God's eternal acceptance because of all Christ has done.

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