

Same-Sex Attraction¹

Biblical/Theological Foundations

We know from the Scriptures that God made the first man, Adam, from the dust of the ground and formed the first woman, Eve, from the rib of Adam.² He bound them together in a marriage covenant intended to endure as long as they both lived.³ From that primeval union, God has willed that all marriages would consist of one man and one woman in a lifelong commitment.⁴ In marriage, the two genders were made to be mutually compatible—spiritually and physically—and also to have the potential for conceiving, bearing, and rearing children.⁵ God has explicitly forbidden sexual intimacy outside the bounds of this marriage covenant.⁶

After the fall of humankind, many perverse distortions of God's order were conceived and practiced by men and women.⁷ Among these sinful distortions was the practice of sexual relations between persons of the same gender. The Scriptures address this phenomenon in multiple texts, all of which speak negatively of homosexual conduct.

The men of Sodom sought to have intercourse (perhaps by force) with the angels who visited Lot, and this was one demonstration of the depravity of that city.⁸ The Mosaic Law explicitly forbade homosexual intercourse in two places.⁹ And in Romans, Paul mentioned homosexual acts among both men and women as evidence of God's abandoning them to their sin.¹⁰ In 1 Corinthians, Paul included those engaged in same-sex relations in a list of those who will not inherit the Kingdom of God.¹¹ (It should be noted, however, that this statement was not simply a word of condemnation, but rather an invitation to live in the reality of being "washed,... sanctified,... justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God."¹²) Similarly, in 1 Timothy, Paul mentioned homosexual men among those who are doing things which are contrary to the gospel.¹³ Finally, Jude pointed to the

¹ While various terms such as same-sex attraction, homosexuality, LGBT, etc., could be used, each has various connotations and sometimes specific agenda. This Letter uses primarily the former and its abbreviation SSA in an effort to be merely descriptive and not pejorative or ideological. Other terms will be used at times, but with the same intent. "LGBTQ" will be used in part of the discussion because of the context to which it refers, but also without pejorative or ideological intent.

² Genesis 1:27; 2:18-22.

³ Genesis 2:24.

⁴ Malachi 2:13-16; Matthew 19:3-6; Ephesians 5:22-33.

⁵ Genesis 2:23; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Song of Songs; Malachi 2:15; Ephesians 6:1-4.

⁶ Exodus 20:14; Proverbs 5:15-22; Matthew 5:27-30; Ephesians 5:3; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8.

⁷ Genesis 6:5, 6; Galatians 5:19-21; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8.

⁸ Genesis 19:4-11. The text makes it clear that the men of Sodom believed the angels to be men.

⁹ Leviticus 18:22; 20:13.

¹⁰ Romans 1:26-27.

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 6:9-11.

¹² 1 Corinthians 6:11.

¹³ 1 Timothy 1:8-11.

sexual immorality of Sodom and Gomorrah as an example to warn us of God's judgment.¹⁴ Although Jesus is not quoted on this specific topic in the gospel accounts, He repeatedly endorsed the sexual standards as well as the law as a whole given in the Old Testament,¹⁵ which includes a ban on all homosexual conduct.

Contemporary Challenges

Biblical teaching on homosexual practice has come under severe attack in recent decades. It is important, therefore, for the church to be prepared to respond to these several objections.

Exegetical Challenges

The objections to historic biblical teaching which may well have the most insidious long-term effect upon the church are the so-called "revisionist interpretations" of Scripture. In seeking to justify homosexual behavior, these revisionists employ innovative exegetical methods to avoid the intended meanings of multiple biblical texts. Their methodology not only undermines the biblical sexual ethic, but also the clarity and authority of the Scriptures themselves. They suggest that Sodom was not judged for homosexual conduct but for lack of hospitality, that Levitical laws against homosexual conduct no longer apply in our New Testament age, that Jesus' lack of specific mention of homosexuality is an implied approval of it, that Paul's explicit condemnations of homosexual behavior are culturally conditioned and linguistically ambivalent. All these interpretations are contrary to a good faith reading of the texts. Those who use their intellectual prowess to deceive others through revisionist reinterpretation fall under the same severe condemnation as those who did the same during the age of the apostles.¹⁶ Integrity requires that someone who disagrees with biblical teaching simply say so rather than attempt to distort the plain meaning of Scripture.¹⁷ As Jesus warned the churches of Pergamum and Thyatira, He will not condone or tolerate such behavior by His Church.¹⁸ Evangelical scholars have written excellent exegetical analyses of relevant Scripture texts that help guide those who are genuinely seeking the truth from God's Word.¹⁹ Pastors and elders must be proactive in countering these deceptive teachings, especially because the revisionism appeals to a view of truth based upon individual happiness that is pervasive among younger people, as well as increasingly among older believers. We must call our people back to the truth of God's Word.

Scientific Challenges

In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association declassified homosexuality as a disorder, thus normalizing it among American physicians and psychologists. Arguments are often

¹⁴ Jude 7.

¹⁵ Matthew 5:27-32; 19:7-9.

¹⁶ Romans 16:17-19; Colossians 2:8; 2 Timothy 3:13; Revelation 2:20; 1 John 4:6.

¹⁷ 2 Timothy 3:8; 2 Peter 3:1b; Jude 4.

¹⁸ See Revelation 2:14-16; 20-23.

¹⁹ See especially DeYoung, Gagnon, and Via and Gagnon in the recommended readings.

made that same-sex attraction is genetic and no different from simply being left-handed. The Christian's response is that regardless of what social scientists may declare as "normal," we believe that the Scriptures are the only infallible rule of faith and practice. Furthermore, we are all born with many innate tendencies which must be resisted or controlled—the tendency toward anger, greed, lust, and pride all can be inherited, but that does not make them acceptable. The nature/nurture debate should not alter the ethical assessment of homosexual behavior, sexual lusts, desires to sin, or the duty to flee temptation, except that by these studies we are made more deeply sympathetic toward anyone struggling with the temptations and sins involved. In instances where there has been childhood sexual abuse or other environmental influences, these need to be compassionately recognized and taken into account in counseling the SSA person. The Christian's primary concern is about their relationship to God, and need for His grace to save them from sexual sin, sinful lusts and behaviors, and deliverance from temptation and evil, whether arising from their corrupted nature or the fallenness of creation. Love for and loyalty to our Lord Jesus Christ compels us to flee temptation and rely upon the life of his Spirit within us.

Social Challenges

In 2015, the United States Supreme Court ruled that same-sex marriages must be allowed and recognized in all 50 states.²⁰ This highly controversial action by the United States' highest court was the culmination of many years of growing dissent among those who believed the prohibition was discriminatory against those of the LGBTQ community, including (for example) violence and housing discrimination. The Christian response should begin with our whole-hearted endorsement of granting all legitimate civil rights equally to all citizens of our country. We should be grateful when true injustice is addressed. At the same time, we believe that sexual conduct is a moral issue for individuals, churches, and nations. Therefore the church would be unfaithful to her mission were she not to speak out clearly and boldly. We live in a strongly secularized, human-centered, morally relativistic culture, and we should, therefore, expect many challenges from our society to our belief system, our standards of conduct, and our views on healthy public policy. To those who say that the evangelical church is on the wrong side of history, we would say that our hope is in the Lord and not in human approval.

Missional Challenges

In recent years, the evangelical church has experienced a growing concern that our historic theological and ethical beliefs regarding homosexual conduct have marginalized us in our culture and minimized our ability to reach the LGBTQ community for Christ. Many have questioned whether the evangelical church will survive in our times without adapting its beliefs on sexual morality. As a result, a number of former evangelicals have announced a

²⁰ Obergefell v. Hodges, 576, U.S. Supreme Court, June 26, 2015.
www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/14pdf/14- 556 3204.pdf (accessed 12/19/2017).

change in their views and have led some churches openly to endorse same-sex marriage and to invite unrepentant, practicing homosexuals to join those churches and be eligible to serve in positions of leadership. This is a rejection of the lordship of Jesus Christ which requires faithful adherence to the Scriptures, no matter what it costs us, no matter whether the church grows or shrinks, and no matter how the world will view us. Furthermore, we must insist to those former evangelicals that the Scriptures place our sexual conduct at the core of our ethical behavior as Christians.²¹ To believe otherwise is to put one's self outside the boundaries of historic orthodox Christianity. We believe ultimately that the only ones who can effectively reach this generation are those who radically and sacrificially follow the Lord Jesus Christ. Many Christians who experience SSA are committed to the biblical sexual ethic, while continuing to experience SSA. We stand alongside them offering support as each of us seeks to die to ourselves and live to Christ. We believe rather than marginalization being our missional undoing, that our very marginalization gives us a prophetic stance for a faithful, biblically compassionate ministry to our LGBTQ neighbors.

Pastoral Guidance

Our counsel to those who are same-sex attracted (SSA)

Our commitment to same-sex attracted people, both within the church and without, is that we shall love them as God loves them, and God helping us, we promise them our unequivocally loyal friendship. We want them to know that we believe that we are all sinners, bruised and broken by the fall, and in need of God's pardoning and transforming grace. We have all violated the Seventh Commandment—and every other commandment.²² None of us has the right to condemn another, but rather to encourage each other to find forgiveness, healing, and guidance from the Lord Jesus Christ. But one aspect of the gospel message is to remind ourselves and others that a rejection of Christ's lordship leads to eternal misery.²³

All of the Christian life is one of repentance, and we are called compassionately to urge on all of our neighbors to such radical obedience. Without exception, we all must continually repent of our lusts and sinful desires and turn in faith and obedience to the Lord. Sin has corrupted the human heart. That corruption is sin and gives rise to disordered desires, which are also sin. Same-sex sexual lusts and desires are an example of such sin. Consequently, the corrupt heart, its lusts, and desires, including unbidden sinful thoughts, are to be repented of, mourned, and mortified. We must flee all temptation to same-sex sexual desires and carefully guard against any latent propensity to that temptation.²⁴

As a follower of Christ, it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me — and the life we now live in the body we live by faith in the Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us. Any other identities or loyalties we have are subordinate to and must be understood

²¹ For example see 1 Corinthians 6:9 where sexual immorality epitomizes ungodliness.

²² Matthew 5:27.

²³ Luke 19:27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; Revelation 21:8; 22:15.

²⁴ James 1:13-15.

relative to our union with Jesus. The dominion of sin has been broken and now grace reigns – we are being made new! We who are redeemed must identify sin remaining in us as that which must be repented of and expunged. Our bodies, desires, temperaments, personalities, emotions are all being sanctified, and though not all the miseries of sin with which we are afflicted will be healed in this life, those broken conditions will eventually away and our union with the resurrected Christ will remain.

One's identity as SSA then must be subordinated to our union with Christ: our besetting sin may be same-sex lust, but we need to be repenting of that and seeking growth in sanctification as we turn away from it to Christ in a new obedience. A persistent temptation to same-sex lust may be our constant companion, but we are united to Christ, who has empowered us by his Spirit to mortify the flesh and he will ultimately deliver us from even that misery. How we think of ourselves matters, and shapes the way we go about our lives. And we must first and foremost think of ourselves as dead to sin, with it having no dominion over us because we are alive in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Since SSA is a result of the fall into sin, it is never inherently accompanied by any advantage to the individual that is pleasing to God. Any experience or affection that is good and pleasing to God (intimate friendships, hobbies, personalities, interests, etc.) that appears to be connected to being SSA or LGBTQ, is not a product of being SSA or LGBTQ, but rather is a good gift from God independent of the brokenness of SSA.

Any experience or affection that seems good, but enables or encourages same-sex lust or temptation is actually not good, and must be mortified and fled. In our union with Christ, we have fellowship with him in his sufferings. Because of this, God uses our experience of sorrow and temptation to conform us more and more into the image of Jesus. That does not make the sufferings good, but what we and the world mean for evil, God can use as he works all things together for the good of those who love him. God can sanctify to us even our deepest distress as we cast ourselves upon the grace of our Father. The denial of self and our deep-seated desires when we repent of same-sex sexual lusts and flee from same-sex temptations for the sake of Christ are the sufferings of taking up our cross to follow Jesus. And if we suffer with him, we have fellowship with Jesus in his life.²⁵

That means that how one who experiences SSA describes oneself requires the exercise of wisdom. Consider for example the language of “gay Christian”. We recognize that some Christians may use the term “gay” in an effort to be more readily understood by non-Christians. The word “gay” is common in our culture, and we do not think it wise for churches to police every use of the term.²⁶ If “gay Christian” is meant to refer to a Christian who affirms, engages or expresses solidarity with same-sex sexual activity or desire, it is an oxymoron and inappropriate. If it is meant to refer to the ongoing experience of a persistent, latent pull towards same-sex sexual temptation while one is making every effort

²⁵ Genesis 50:20; Matthew 16:24; Romans 8:17, 28; Galatians 2:20; Westminster Confession of Faith 26.1.

²⁶ The preceding two sentences are taken verbatim from “The Report of the Ad Interim Committee on Human Sexuality to the Forty-Eighth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in American (2019-2020)”, page 12.

by God's grace to think and act according to God's will, then it may be a useful descriptive term in some settings

We, however, affirm that those in our churches would be wise to avoid the term "gay Christian." Although the term "gay" may refer to more than being attracted to persons of the same sex, the term does not communicate less than that. For many people in our culture, to self-identify as "gay" suggests that one is engaged in homosexual practice. At the very least, the term normally communicates the presence and approval of same-sex sexual attraction as morally neutral or morally praiseworthy.²⁷

Our counsel to the body of Christ

God has provided His church as the community in which we all must give and receive affection, encouragement, and accountability. Christians who experience SSA should exercise great care and wisdom when it comes to disclosing that experience publicly. They are well-advised to share initially only with trusted, wise advisers including godly friends, pastors, and counselors. The culturally-shaped process of "coming out" is often complicated by motives such as seeking same-sex partners, relieving guilty consciences, or publicly pronouncing the rejection of biblical ethics. It is not dishonest to wait and be discerning in how and to whom one discloses one's struggles. In some cases, after receiving wisdom from godly counselors, it could be helpful for some Christians to make known publicly their ongoing, largely fruitful struggle with same-sex attraction or gender dysphoria.

One of the pressing questions of the church concerns expectations for change. What expectations of change (if any) should be presented to the SSA Christian, to their families, to their churches? God's design for marriage and sex in creation is good, and healing from the misery of the Fall in this life may include godly desires for biblical marriage and sex. But God promises that ultimate and true healing from the misery of the Fall is only found in the return of Christ; Jesus is the yes and amen to God's promises, and we rest our hope upon him, not in the change of our broken condition now. The absence of opposite-sex sexual desires is not evidence of lack of sanctification. God promises that in this life he will, by his Spirit, grow us in holiness in conformity to Christ. Whether we continue to experience SSA, enter into a biblical marriage, or are single all our life, God promises we will grow in grace and that Jesus will never leave nor forsake us

With this in mind, through the promised presence of the sanctifying Holy Spirit:

- 1) We can expect ongoing growth in righteousness and holiness as our fellowship with Christ deepens. Though we often stumble and fall, we can expect increased strength in resisting sin, including same-sex lusts.
- 2) We who are united to Christ and growing in grace should expect increased intensity in satanic assaults of temptation. The ongoing experience of temptation is not a sign of sin or lack of sanctification, but we are enabled by the Spirit to flee every

²⁷ This paragraph is taken from "The Report of the Ad Interim Committee on Human Sexuality to the Forty-Eighth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in American (2019-2020)", page 12.

temptation, including the temptation to same-sex lusts.

- 3) In some cases, those who experience SSA will not only grow in resisting same-sex desires, but may be open to biblical marriage and/or develop opposite-sex sexual desires. While this should not be held out as a universal expectation for all (since God does not always grant it), we should not fail to invite God to do so. We can fervently pray and seek such change but must do so in a way that helps rather than harms.

There can be a peculiar and intense loneliness that accompanies SSA Christians who have committed themselves to a life of celibacy. It can be a loneliness more intense than that of the celibate heterosexual, who may someday have opportunity and choose to marry. The church must grant special understanding and sympathy toward those who bear this burden, while at the same time confidently calling all her members to sacrifice all things joyfully for the sake of Christ, knowing that we shall all one day be rewarded beyond our most extravagant dreams, and that we even now experience the pleasure of His presence and favor. Like the Apostle Paul, by God's grace we can learn to be content in all circumstances *in Christ*.²⁸

Our counsel to family and friends of those who are SSA

With the increasing frequency, openness, and popularity of homosexual relationships, evangelical Christians are confronted with some difficult decisions to make: how shall we relate to our sexually active homosexual family member? Shall we invite his or her partner to dinner? ...to spend the night? ...to holidays and family vacations? Shall we attend his or her wedding to a same-sex partner? Do we celebrate births and adoptions of same-sex partners and marriages of friends, family members, and co-workers? In making these decisions we want to be fully faithful to the Scriptures in our words, actions, and attitudes, while at the same time expressing genuine love and acceptance to our SSA family member or friend. This can be a challenge.

Perhaps the place to begin is with our mental framework. We must be rigorously gracious. We must communicate love consistently to our loved ones, letting them know that nothing they believe or do will ever quench our love for them. In fact, our love for them demands that we urge them to make Jesus Christ Savior and Lord over every aspect of their lives so that they may enjoy eternal life. We also want to continue to enjoy their company and be involved in their lives. At the same time, they will need to be fair to us and understand that our differences of belief and practice about sexual morality will mean that, at times, we will be unable to participate with them in ways that would compromise our own convictions. We should freely ask them to accept us in the same way that we strive to accept them. For those who would say that any disagreement with their view of sexuality is inherently hateful, we would say that no one should be coerced into following Christ and that we are committed to a common civic life with all who are willing to live peaceably with one another.²⁹

²⁸ Philippians 4:10-13.

²⁹ Romans 12:18.

What are ways that our participation in the lives of SSA family and friends could compromise our commitment to Christ? In general, anything that communicates, either explicitly or implicitly, support for sexual immorality of any sort would be inappropriate for the Christian. Surely, there is room for discussion and debate on how to handle various situations pastorally, but generally speaking, we advise the following.

When people are old enough to be on their own, their parents, siblings, and friends should not presume to have the authority over their moral decisions; but neither should the ones in immoral relationships seek to manipulate the moral decisions of their parents, siblings, or friends. It is the Christian's moral obligation to respond appropriately to the sin in other people's lives, and the closer our relationship to the one sinning, the greater the obligation. If, for example, a family member chooses to date someone of the same gender, we must love both the family member and his or her partner with Christian love, but we should be sure to lovingly and appropriately communicate to our family member our disagreement with the romantic, sexual, and marital aspects of the relationship and not participate in any way that would signal our approval of it. If a family member chooses to marry someone of the same gender, once again we would love both people in the relationship but should strongly consider excluding ourselves from participating in the immoral union, including attending or participating as a guest in the wedding ceremony. In no way should we officiate the service or actively give sanction to the union (The same would be true of a wedding involving heterosexual individuals who were not biblically suited for marriage.) We cannot endorse the marriage after the ceremony, for example, in allowing them to share the same bed while hosting them in our home (any more than we would allow an unmarried heterosexual couple to do so). Making these detailed decisions is very challenging, subject to misunderstanding, and must be done within the context of clearly affirming our love for all involved and so these decisions are not be made lightly or done thoughtlessly.

When minor children or youth express same-sex desires or tendencies, we should listen carefully and sympathetically to their feelings and experiences. We should thank them for sharing with us and reassure them that we shall always love and support them. At the appropriate moments, we should also help them understand what God's Word says to all of us—that we are to be chaste in all of our relationships (with males *and* females) and remain celibate unless married to a biblically suited spouse. Our children may experience transient SSA as well as gender dysphoria which may be more related to developmental issues, assertion of independence, peer influences, and other factors. Discerning this requires patience and wisdom. But if children and/or youth are convinced of the persistence of their SSA and show no interest in potential opposite gender romance, we should help them to understand that they can live very faithful Christian lives as single persons. We would probably also advise them to disclose their struggle only to those who would edify them and to demonstrate modesty and restraint in their public lives. And we should pledge our lifelong support to walk with them in their weakness just as we hope to receive from them in our own.

Our counsel to Session and Presbyteries

In examining candidates for membership on Boards of Deacons, Sessions, and in Presbyteries, we believe examining presbyters should exercise their authority in a spirit of gentleness, compassion, and understanding. The courts of the church should always listen charitably and consider carefully the testimony of those who experience SSA and are seeking office in the church.

The courts will do well to ensure that candidates are “above reproach, sound in the faith, wise in the things of God, and discreet in all things.” (BOG, 9-3.A) The Scriptures teach that “an overseer, as God’s steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” (Titus 1:7-9)

If candidates for office have disclosed that they experience SSA, the examining elders must first confirm that the candidates have a long record of living chaste sexual lives, both in their physical conduct and also in their desires and attitudes. They then may ask them 1) their grasp of their identity in Christ as new creatures in communion with the Lord, 2) their ethical views concerning homosexual desires and practice, 3) their experience of God’s transforming grace in their own sexual lives and progress they have made in their walk with Christ, 4) their manner of counseling and discipling others who struggle with sexual sin and dysfunction, 5) their rationale regarding their suitability, as those experiencing SSA, to serve as officers within the church, 6) the mistakes they have made and the lessons they have learned in the past in this area, and 7) their strategies to protect themselves and their flocks from any corrupting effects of the candidates’ SSA.

Upon demonstrating godly responses to these and other questions, we believe candidates may be considered for church office.

Church officers who experience SSA should continually honor their ordination vow to promise subjection to their fellow presbyters. When Sessions and Presbyteries provide wise guidance on how officers within their jurisdictions publicly describe their experience of SSA and how they shepherd others who experience SSA, those officers should have a posture of humility, seeking the peace, unity, and edification of the Church.

Our counsel to pastors, elders, and congregations

It is incumbent upon the local church to minister faithfully in situations involving LGBTQ issues. We advise church Sessions explicitly to endorse the EPC “Position Paper on Human Sexuality” as well as this Pastoral Letter to provide a general theological, ethical, and pastoral framework for its ministry. While we welcome anyone to attend our churches and to participate in our various ministries, it is essential that our churches admit into their membership and into positions of leadership only those who have a credible testimony of

repentant faith in Jesus Christ. One involved in unrepentant homosexual or heterosexual misconduct does not have such a credible testimony.³⁰

When same-gender marriage couples become believers and desire to join the local church and baptize their children, each case must be carefully assessed; but normally we believe that those who genuinely receive Jesus Christ will want their repentance to be more notable than their sin.³¹ This would mean that a same-sex couple who commits themselves to following Christ would come to acknowledge their marital union was contrary to His will, would take steps to renounce all inappropriate conduct, and seek to remove even the appearance of evil.³² In the case of children, when the parents become believers, one of the parents would assume parental custody and the other would continue to be an influence for good in the children's lives. Only the parent who assumed custody of the child would present the child for baptism and assume the parental vows.

Recommended Reading

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³⁰ Church Sessions are already responsible to exercise this type of discernment under G-8, including "The Session shall satisfy itself that each applicant for membership demonstrates evidence of true commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and determination to live as becomes a follower of Christ" (G-8-2-C).

³¹ Luke 19:1-10.

³² Ephesians 5:7, 11, 12; 1 Thessalonians 5:22.

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