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## **Cultural Influences on Hermeneutical Frameworks in the Debate on Same-Sex Relationships**

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### **Abstract**

Socio-cultural changes in the West have influenced interpretation and use of scriptural texts among both those who oppose and support same-sex relationships. Cultural distance from the values of antiquity on matters of family structures and perceptions of people attracted to the same sex have led to greater attention to theological reflection beyond the standard biblical prohibition texts, particularly among conservative evangelicals. This article looks at two key areas of discussion: theological anthropology (sex difference) and sanctification.

**Key words:** Sex Difference; Imago Dei; LGBT; Evangelical; Theological Anthropology; Sanctification; Culture; Same-Sex Marriage; Hermeneutics

In February 2019, the United Methodist Church held a special General Conference to address same-sex marriage and ordination for gay, lesbian, and bisexual people (LGB).<sup>1</sup> The vote was an attempt to move the denomination beyond decades of in-fighting over human sexuality. The final count was 53 percent in favor of maintaining the traditionalist stance prohibiting same-sex relationships and ordination of "practicing homosexuals."<sup>2</sup> One of the most significant revelations is the pronounced international divide: the majority of American delegates opposed the traditionalist plan, preferring a centrist solution that would allow for differing views and policies while still maintaining communion.<sup>3</sup> The status quo was largely upheld by representatives from Africa, Russia, the Philippines, and other non-Western countries.

The international divide demonstrates the impact of culture on Christian ethics and theological interpretation. Socio-cultural factors are influencing Western Christians in progressive directions. Yet, those same factors are also impacting Western traditionalists'

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<sup>1</sup> The UMC has no official position on transgender clergy. This article is primarily about same-sex relationships and not gender identity (which deserves its own discussion). Thus, I use the acronym LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) or the term "sexual minorities."

<sup>2</sup> Heather Hahn and Kathy L. Gilbert, "Traditional Plan Advances as One Church, Simple Plans Fail," *UM News*, February 25, 2019, <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/traditional-plan-advances-as-one-church-simple-plans-fail>.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Holland, "67% of U.S. Delegates Support the One-Church Plan," *Mainstream UMC*, February 18, 2019, <https://mainstreamumc.com/blog/67-of-u-s-delegates-support-one-church-plan/>.

arguments, especially among conservative evangelicals. Dependence on the handful of biblical prohibitions against same-sex relations is increasingly giving way to broader theological reflection. In this article, I summarize socio-cultural factors that have affected the conversation before exploring two areas that are becoming more prominent in the discussion for evangelicals: theological anthropology (sex difference) and sanctification.

### **Socio-Cultural Factors in the Acceptance of Same-Sex Relationships**

A 2017 Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) survey found nearly two-thirds of American white mainline Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox Christians support marriage for same-sex couples, while only one third of evangelicals do.<sup>4</sup> Across Christian denominations and other religious groups, evangelicals remain opposed to same-sex relationships at much higher rates (only Jehovah's Witnesses are less supportive). Thus, the on-going debate largely subsists on the influence of the evangelical community, the notable exception being young evangelicals who affirm marriage for same-sex couples at 53 percent vs. 25 percent of evangelical seniors.

The survey shows a sharp increase in approval rates in recent years, especially among the younger generations. Across every demographic category, young people are leading the way toward acceptance of sexual minorities. A variety of factors have contributed to this phenomenon, but four seem particularly influential:

1. *Procreation is no longer an inevitable result of marital sex or required for survival* (e.g. a subsistence economy, patrilineal inheritance). Modern contraception and wealth have made procreation elective and not automatically expected of marriage.
2. *Egalitarian relationships between men and women have made hierarchical gender norms less compelling*. Concern over violation of the dominant/submissive marital paradigm plays a role in opposition to same-sex relationships.
3. *Increased opportunity for LGB people to come out of the closet, reducing misconceptions*. Friendship with LGB people challenges inaccurate perceptions.
4. *Recognition that persistent and enduring same-sex attraction is unchosen and unchangeable for most people*. Communities that oppose same-sex relationships often believe homosexuality results from a character flaw rather than possible prenatal factors. Openness to scientific discovery influences perceptions of sexual minorities.

In the West, friendship with LGB people has been particularly influential. Theology professor Mark Achtemeier illustrates this point in his story of becoming affirming:

Like so many traditionalists, I was accustomed to thinking of homosexuality as a kind of destructive addiction, a disordered inclination toward damaging behaviors . . . I was expecting to find self-indulgent individuals, who were inclined to elevate their own personal gratification above any serious wrestling with Christian discipleship. My prejudices could not have been more mistaken. What I found instead were devoted

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<sup>4</sup> Robert P. Jones, et al., "Emerging Consensus on LGBT Issues: Findings from the 2017 American Values Atlas," *PRRI*, <https://www.ppri.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/AVA-2017-FINAL.pdf>.

Christian believers, filled with grace.<sup>5</sup>

Importantly, young adults (ages 18 to 29) in the above-mentioned survey are the first generation to have commonplace friendships with sexual minorities who are out of the closet. As a result, inaccurate and degrading caricatures of sexual minorities are no longer persuasive.

In non-Western countries that oppose sexual minorities, some or all of the four influential socio-cultural factors are not widely evident. For example, false caricatures are still effective because it is not safe for LGB people to be transparent about their lives. The public does not have the opportunity to build meaningful connections with sexual minorities. Instead perceptions are shaped by Christian leaders like Seyoum Antonios, who uses slide shows of extreme pornographic images to teach what LGB people are like.<sup>6</sup>

### **Socio-Cultural Factors and Biblical Interpretation**

In patricentric cultures that place high value on procreation for communal welfare, little explanation is needed to support the biblical texts that prohibit same-sex relations. The cultural distance is minimal. As both progressive and traditionalist scholars agree, two primary reasons for opposition to same-sex relations in antiquity were non-procreative sex and violation of hierarchical gender norms.<sup>7</sup> These reasons are less compelling in the West today and therefore mitigate the influence of the prohibition passages.

Another impact on interpretation of the prohibition texts is increased attention to human rights. Realization that same-sex relations in antiquity were primarily exploitative, involving slavery, prostitution, and abuse of minors affects how readers understand and apply the prohibitions. Notably, young American (white) evangelicals in recent years are increasingly sensitive to social justice. The stark contrast between a loving same-sex relationship and 1<sup>st</sup> century homoerotic exploitation is not lost on them.

But it's not only socio-cultural distance between antiquity and the West today that makes the biblical prohibitions less compelling to many Christians. It's also the realization that for hundreds of years the church's view of sexual minorities was inaccurate. People are not attracted to the same sex because of a character flaw or spiritual rebellion. The testimony of LGB people and greater scientific understanding of sexual development have led to re-examining the biblical texts. This is true not only for those who ultimately arrive at a progressive viewpoint on same-sex relationships, but also for traditionalists.

Historically, theologians interpreted Romans 1 to assert that those attracted to the same

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Achtemeier, "And Grace Will Lead Me Home: Inclusion and Evangelical Conscience," *Covenant Network of Presbyterians*, November 30, 2009, <https://covnetpres.org/2009/11/and-grace-will-lead-me-home/>.

<sup>6</sup> Kapyia Kaoma, "Meet Seyoum Antonios, Ethiopia's Martin Ssempe," *Political Research Associates*, June 10, 2014, <https://www.politicalresearch.org/2014/06/10/meet-seyoum-antonios-ethiopias-martin-ssempe/>.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 164, 166, 169–70; James Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 82, 154–55, 240.

sex are obstinate idolaters.<sup>8</sup> But many Western traditionalists today avoid that conclusion. Romans 1 is reinterpreted to say LGB people have a fallen nature, common to all human beings. Christians with same-sex attraction are struggling with the effects of original sin. The question is whether this is a legitimate reframing of Romans 1. The passage describes Gentile idolaters, not God-fearers contending with the sin nature. Alternatively, a reasonable case could be made that Paul held to pre-scientific assumptions about sexual minorities that were exacerbated by the exploitative nature of male same-sex relations in his social context.

In essence, socio-cultural factors in the West are affecting how both traditionalists and progressives interpret Scripture. Conservative evangelicals, in particular, are facing the burden of showing why marriage should be reserved for a male-female union. This has moved the conversation into deeper theological complexities. Two key areas of attention are theological anthropology (sex difference) and sanctification.

### What Is the Meaning of Sex Difference?

De-emphasis on procreation and patricentric gender roles has led Western evangelicals to increasingly draw on theological anthropology to bolster an argument for a cosmic meaning of sex difference (and therefore heterosexual marriage).<sup>9</sup> This approach leans more on Genesis 1–2 and Ephesians 5 than the standard prohibition texts.<sup>10</sup> Traditionalists argue that a male-female binary is the “most primordial” of human distinctions, and we cannot be fully human or obedient to God without respecting this ontological reality.<sup>11</sup> Commonly, traditionalists appeal to Gen 1:26–27 to claim sexual differentiation is a reflection of the divine image.<sup>12</sup> God is above sexual categories, but masculine and feminine qualities are found in the divine. For example, Stanley Grenz appeals to “masculine” imagery in the Bible depicting God speaking things into existence, while the “feminine” side of God is portrayed as a nurturing mother.<sup>13</sup>

Traditionalists’ connection of sex difference with the *imago Dei* is heavily rooted in the work of Karl Barth, who was the first to combine them.<sup>14</sup> To frame marriage, Barth borrowed the concept “I and Thou” from Jewish thinker Martin Buber (and others), but did so by superimposing the binary of male and female.<sup>15</sup> He interpreted the plural in Genesis—“Let us

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<sup>8</sup> For example, see John Chrysostom’s *Homily 4 on Romans*.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher C. Roberts, *Creation and Covenant: The Significance of Sexual Difference in the Moral Theology of Marriage* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 226.

<sup>10</sup> Romans 1 is also used, but with the belief that Paul is referring to the fall. Thus, it is read through the lens of Genesis.

<sup>11</sup> Roberts, *Creation and Covenant*, 237; Stanley J. Grenz, *Sexual Ethics: An Evangelical Perspective* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 28.

<sup>12</sup> Grenz, *Sexual Ethics*, 44–51.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 34–35; Roberts, *Creation and Covenant*, 164–65; Wesley Hill, “Gunning for Complementarity,” *The Living Church*, June 7, 2013, <https://livingchurch.org/2013/06/07/gunning-complementarity/>; Preston Sprinkle, *People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality Is Not Just An Issue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 38–39; Christopher Yuan, *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel* (New York: Multnomah, 2018), 20–22.

<sup>15</sup> Megan K. DeFranza, *Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female, and Intersex in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 147–48.

make humankind in our image”(1:26; NRSV)—as a reference to the Trinity. Thus, human beings reflect the image of God through relationality.<sup>16</sup> But Barth didn’t stop by saying the *imago Dei* is relational. He said we reflect God’s relationality specifically in sexual differentiation. For Barth, this interpersonal community of male and female is found not only in marriage but in relationships between the sexes in general. Thus, community *itself* is defined by male-female encounter. Barth surmised that same-sex relationships are problematic because, in his view, they withdraw from community. They turn in on themselves. Community must entail men turning to women and women turning to men.<sup>17</sup>

Traditionalists’ heavy reliance on Barth’s proposal is not without its challenges, not least of all because shortly before his death Barth indicated in a letter (through his personal assistant Eberhard Busch) that he was dissatisfied with how he had discussed gay people in *Church Dogmatics* III/4.<sup>18</sup> He indicated an openness to reevaluating his proposal on community in light of new social-scientific insights on sexuality.

Indeed, Barth’s own theology of community leaves room for same-sex relationships even if one retains his notion of co-humanity of male and female. He specifically states that co-humanity between the sexes does not require marriage. Traditionalist Wesley Hill makes the same point, interpreting Barth for celibate people.<sup>19</sup> Male and female relate to each other in many ways outside of marriage. Thus, people who marry the same-sex are still fully able to engage with the opposite sex in the broader human community just as celibate people who don’t have an opposite sex spouse.

Yet, traditionalists further argue that male-female is the *paradigmatic* reflection of relationality in the *imago Dei*; a same-sex marriage by itself cannot exemplify the Trinitarian community that includes both similarity and difference. Of course, this takes us back to the question of whether sex difference finds its theological meaning in the *imago Dei*. Christian tradition and a closer look at the biblical text itself suggest it does not.

### *Sex Difference and Imago Dei in Christian Tradition*

Barth’s views were unusual in the history of Jewish and Christian understandings of the *imago Dei*. Past thinkers were concerned such conclusions were anthropomorphic.<sup>20</sup> The famous Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 BCE–50 CE) argued “Let no one think that he is able to judge of this likeness [of God] from the characters of the body”<sup>21</sup> He claimed humanity reflects

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<sup>16</sup> Barth, *CD* III/1, §41.2.

<sup>17</sup> Barth, *CD* III/4, §54.1.

<sup>18</sup> Karl Barth, *Offene Briefe 1945–1968*, ed. Diether Koch, *Gesamtausgabe* 15 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag), 542–43.

<sup>19</sup> Wesley Hill, “A Note on Karl Barth, Celibacy, and the ‘Image of God,’” *First Things*, April 18, 2013, <https://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2013/04/a-note-on-karl-barth-celibacy-and-the-image-of-god>.

<sup>20</sup> In *Creation and Covenant*, Roberts provides a historical survey on sex difference that is helpful for primary source citation. But he downplays that most of Christian tradition found sex difference significant primarily for procreation and rejected connection of sex difference with the *imago Dei*.

<sup>21</sup> Philo, *Opif.* 69; All translations of Philo from *The Works of Philo*, trans. Charles Duke Yonge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993).

God's image "with reference to the most important part of the soul, namely, the mind." Philo was influenced by Greek philosophy, but his conclusions are also theological and exegetical.

Theologically, Philo rejected anthropomorphizing God, a long-held Jewish concern. Exegetically, he noticed the two distinct creation accounts in Genesis. Believing this literary fact to be significant, he read much of Genesis 1 as God brainstorming an incorporeal blueprint of the world.<sup>22</sup> Then he interpreted Gen 2:6–25 as the material construction of that world, as God breathed the previously created soul into the human body.<sup>23</sup> His view of a two-step process also draws on his exegesis of the phrase "before it was upon the earth" in Gen 2:5.<sup>24</sup> Notably, he asserts that prior to receiving a body, the incorporeal human being was "neither male nor female."

Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335–395 CE) also denied that sex difference, a corporeal reality, could reflect an incorporeal God. The purpose of sex difference is procreation.<sup>25</sup> He further speculates that since our eschatological reality is like the angels who are one essence and do not marry and procreate, so also our prelapsarian ontological state might have been undifferentiated.<sup>26</sup> Like Philo, Gregory draws his conclusions based on his understanding of literary stylistics in Genesis, as well as exegesis of Gal 3:23 (no male and female in Christ) and Luke 20:35–36 (angelic state in the eschaton). He considered the image of God to be asexual.<sup>27</sup>

Augustine (354–430 CE) speculated that sex difference would exist in the eschaton with some kind of altered significance.<sup>28</sup> But, he does not therefore conclude sexual differentiation reflects the *imago Dei*. He saw the *imago Dei* as an incorporeal characteristic (rational mind).<sup>29</sup> Like those before him, he understood procreation to be the primary purpose of sex difference.<sup>30</sup>

Maximus the Confessor (580–662 CE) believed that through Christ is the removal "of the difference between male and female, and instead of men and women . . . [Christ] showed us as properly and truly to be simply human beings."<sup>31</sup> Some question exists whether Maximus means sexual differentiation was not in God's prelapsarian plan or rather only sexual reproduction was a by-product.<sup>32</sup> But, either way, drawing on Gal 3:23, he does not see a reason that sexual differentiation will exist in the eschaton.<sup>33</sup>

Later theologians also rejected sex difference in connection with the *imago Dei*. Reading Gen 1:27, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274 CE) said "the image of God is common to both sexes, being in the mind which has no distinction of sex."<sup>34</sup> He believed the purpose of sexual

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 16–20, 24–26, 29–31, 129–30.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 134–35.

<sup>24</sup> Philo, QG 2.

<sup>25</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De op. hom.* 16.9; 17.5.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 16.9; 17.2–3; 22.4–5.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 16.9.

<sup>28</sup> Augustine, *Civ.* 22.17

<sup>29</sup> Augustine, *Trin.* 12.7.12

<sup>30</sup> Augustine, *Gen. litt.* 9.3.5; 9.5.9; 9.9.15; 9.11.19; See also *Bon. conj.* 11; *Nupt.* 2.5.14

<sup>31</sup> Maximus, *Amb.Io.* 41:9; Translated by Sotiris Mitralaxis ("Rethinking the Problem of Sexual Difference in Ambiguum 41," *Analogia* 2 [2017], 107–112).

<sup>32</sup> Maximus, *Amb.Io.* 41:3. See Mitralaxis's discussion.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 41:7.

<sup>34</sup> Aquinas, *ST I.93.6*; *Summa Theologiae: Man Made to God's Image*, vol. 13, trans. Edmund Hill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 67, 71.

differentiation was to “mate in copulation for procreating.”<sup>35</sup> Among the Reformers, Martin Luther (1483–1546 CE) had a more favorable view of sexual relations beyond procreation, but he still said the “chief end” of male-female union is propagation.<sup>36</sup> He had a high view of sexed bodies, but despite that did not believe sexual differentiation is a reflection of the image of God. He said appreciating the beauty of a sexed creature is not the point; rather our *purpose* is what *imago Dei* is about, namely, obeying and worshipping God.<sup>37</sup>

Some traditionalists suggest we reflect God’s image through gender, rather than sex. God has “masculine” and “feminine” qualities that are incorporeal. Yet, the modern, academic distinction between sex and gender was devised to illustrate that gender is a social construct. Concepts of gender norms fluctuate and change based on cultural factors, not fixed characteristics. Traditionalists counter that certain gender features are permanent, for example, arguing men are inherently pursuers while women are receivers. Similarly, those who hold to hierarchical complementarity assert a permanent dominate/submissive paradigm, using Christ’s subordination to the Father in the Trinitarian relationship as the model. But as both ancient and current scholars have pointed out, the proposal that Christ is eternally submissive to the Father (even functionally) leads to heretical problems (e.g. denial of divine simplicity).<sup>38</sup>

### *Sex Difference and the Imago Dei in Scripture*

The prevailing view in church history that the meaning of sex difference resides primarily in procreation is reflected in Genesis 1. The creation of sexual differentiation is explicitly tied to “Be fruitful and multiply.” Fertility is a dominant theme in the first creation story, not only for human beings (vv. 27–28), but also plants and animals (vv. 11–12, 21–22, 24–25). Most earlier theologians interpreted Gen 1:27 as God creating *humanity* in the divine image with sex difference as an earthy characteristic we share with animals. Therefore, the text does not simply say God created male and female, but first God created the *hā’ādām* (human being). If the *imago Dei* is unique to human beings, then sexual differentiation does not qualify, as animals are also created male and female.

Biblical scholars stress the importance of reading Gen 1:26–27 in its ancient Near Eastern context.<sup>39</sup> An Israelite would not hear the word “image” without thinking of an idol—a wood or stone depiction of a god that conveyed divine presence. For the Israelites, human beings are to convey God’s presence. This representation, in distinction from animals, occurs through the assignment to rule. God made humankind in the divine image and likeness “so that” they might

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, I.98.2; trans. Hill, 157.

<sup>36</sup> Martin Luther, “A Sermon on the Estate of Marriage (1519),” in *The Christian in Society I*, Luther’s Works 44, ed. James Atkinson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 12.

<sup>37</sup> Theo M. M. A. C. Bell, “Man is a Microcosmos: Adam and Eve in Luther’s *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–1545),” *CTQ* 69 (2005): 159–84.

<sup>38</sup> For a helpful overview see D. Glenn Butner Jr., *The Son Who Learned Obedience: A Theological Case Against the Eternal Submission of the Son* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2018). Barth problematically builds his view of male-female community on the idea of eternal subordination of the Son (*Church Dogmatics*, IV.1.202).

<sup>39</sup> J. Richard Middleton, “The Liberating Image? Interpreting the Imago Dei in Context,” *CSR* 24 (1994): 8–25.

have dominion over the earth (v. 26).<sup>40</sup> The *imago Dei* is not merely the ability to assert authority, as authority can be wielded in ways contrary to God's will. Rather human beings are to govern in a manner that makes God known.<sup>41</sup>

The ruling function of the *imago Dei* is carried over into the New Testament, wherein we are seated with Christ on his throne in the heavenly realms (Eph 2:6; Rev 3:21). In Christ we are no longer "male and female" (Gal 3:28), but in Christ we reign forever. Paul even says we will judge angels (1 Cor 6:2–3). But crucially, that rule is not our own will and whim. We are to make God's character and purposes known, especially as modeled by Jesus. Christ is the "image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (Col 3:15). And we are predestined to be "conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom 8:29; see also 2 Cor 3:18).

To have a "new self, created according to the likeness of God," is to mirror God's right and just character (Eph 4:24). Paul puts this in concrete terms: speak truthfully, control one's temper, work honestly, share with the needy, build others up with words, and be kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving (vv. 25–32). We reflect God by embodying the fruit of the Spirit. This is also apparent in Ephesians 5. In this passage, husbands are instructed to love their wives as Christ loved the church. That is, put on the new self. The focus is not differentiation (in fact, the metaphor is of a single person's head and body), but rather *the loving manner in which* the husband treats his wife.

The *imago Dei* is not about sex difference. We do not imitate Jesus's male body; otherwise women would need to become men to reflect God's image. Nor can the *imago Dei* refer to hierarchical gender characteristics. As fellow heirs, women are seated with Christ on the throne along with men. Moreover, Jesus's submission to the Father is not eternal. Barth was correct that the biblical understanding of *imago Dei* is relational, but wrong about sex difference. The relationality of the *imago Dei* is the manner in which we treat one another.

If then, the image of God is not found in sex difference, what is the point of being male or female? Traditionalists are surely correct that sex has significance, possibly one that endures into the eschaton (though that remains speculative). But it need not be as complicated as we make it out to be. The common view in Christian tradition is a reasonable one, namely, the primary purpose of sex difference is procreation. That is no small thing, but an extraordinary blessing. The union of male and female, whether among human beings or other animal forms results in new *life*. If that is all that sexual differentiation means, it is enough.

Scripture does not give us clarity on sex and gender in the eschaton. If they have any enduring significance, we know the male-female union is diminished (Luke 20:35–36). That necessarily broadens the relational meaning of sex and gender. They are not confined to culturally based patricentric systems or procreation. Such expansiveness invites greater flexibility for considering how those with atypical sexual development can fully participate in the goods of family, including marital covenant.

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<sup>40</sup> Translation is from Ian Hart who reasonably interprets the conjunction as "so that" ("Genesis 1:1–2:3 as a Prologue to the Book of Genesis," *TynBul* 46 [1995]: 319–20).

<sup>41</sup> W. Randall Garr suggests that Genesis 1 portrays humanity as a kind of theophany (*In His Own Image and Likeness: Humanity, Divinity, and Monotheism* [Leiden: Brill, 2003], 117).



## Sanctification, Sexual Desire, and Same-Sex Relationships

As discussed at the beginning of this article, perceptions of LGB people affect how Christians make sense of sexual minorities theologically. This includes how sanctification is understood to function in the lives of people who experience persistent same-sex attraction. Many theologians in Christian tradition have interpreted Romans 1 to say same-sex sexuality is caused by a rebellious heart. Thus, the solution is simply a matter of repentance. This view persists today in some communities where faulty caricatures of LGB people as self-indulgent deviants, pedophiles, or drug addicts are still believed. In this framework, same-sex attraction is cured by committing to Christ and cooperating with the Holy Spirit.

In the West, the rebellion view began to be nuanced among researchers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with scientific exploration. This offered a level of compassion, but still treated the phenomenon as a disorder. Eventually, a theory that same-sex attraction is caused by poor parent-child relationships and rejection of one's gender gained influence. In the early 1970s, the ex-gay movement combined this psychoanalytic proposal with principles of sanctification. Participants believed spiritual disciplines and healing alleged childhood wounds would diminish same-sex attraction and cultivate opposite sex desires.

Notably, the ex-gay movement was a *community*. For the first time isolated LGB Christians were able to gather together. This allowed them to communicate with each other about their experiences, including any progress in resolving same-sex attraction. An isolated gay Christian might blame herself for lack of change in sexual orientation, but in community it became possible to draw alternative conclusions. In fact, the realization that other people were also not experiencing change raised pressing new questions. Forty years after its founding, the ex-gay movement collapsed as leaders and participants came to terms with the reality that sexual orientation does not change for most people.<sup>42</sup>

Coinciding with the demise of the ex-gay movement was the rise of the celibate gay movement in the early 2010s. This new movement rejected orientation change efforts and focused on honoring traditional sexual ethics by living celibate. The realization that same-sex desire would not dissipate for most—whether by repentance, progressive sanctification, or an instantaneous “second blessing”—led to new theological conclusions. LGB traditionalists began to view the attraction as a type of congenital disability resulting from the fall. As such, healing was unlikely to occur apart from resurrection.

### *Desire and Sanctification*

The early celibate gay movement concluded that unchangeable same-sex attraction—a symptom of natural fallenness, not moral fallenness—is not sin. Only acting on the desires makes one culpable. This was a logical conclusion. After all, if same-sex desire is merely rebellion, repentance would resolve it. Or if same-sex desire is moral fallenness, it should respond to the sanctification process, leading to diminishment over time. But if the most ardent LGB Christians did everything they possibly could to follow Christ, pleading with God in tears for holy desires to no avail, then another explanation was needed.

Greater scientific insight helped LGB celibates draw new conclusions. It became clear

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<sup>42</sup> However, small pockets of ex-gay support groups continued to exist. Some are trying to rebuild the movement under the rebranded term “oncegay.”

that the psychoanalytic theory of poor parent-child relationships had little peer-reviewed research to back it up. At the same time, research was showing prenatal factors are one probable etiology for same-sex attraction.<sup>43</sup> For example, studies demonstrating a fraternal birth order effect have been replicated across cultures; men with older biological brothers are more likely to be gay.<sup>44</sup> A recent study on why this might be shows mothers of gay sons have higher rates of male fetal protein antibodies.<sup>45</sup>

Celibate LGB Christians have not interpreted this science to conclude a same-sex orientation is a God-intended human variation. But it has allowed them to conclude that the attraction can be congenital and therefore unresponsive to a sanctification process, as with any physical condition. In reaction to these conclusions, certain Reformed evangelicals are arguing that being celibate is not enough; same-sex attraction is sinful in of itself and must be continually mortified.<sup>46</sup> These opponents of the celibate movement do not caricature LGB people as character flawed. But they resist scientific explanations and so place same-sex desire in the realm of moral fallenness.

The celibate movement is notably ecumenical, bringing together Catholics and Protestants. Catholic doctrine teaches that concupiscence (sensual desire) is only the “tinder” for sin and not sin itself. In contrast, Protestants tend to view concupiscence as sinful alongside behavior. Denny Burk, a prominent Reformed voice arguing for the sinfulness of same-sex attraction says the object of a desire determines the sinfulness of an attraction. Thus, he also believes non-marital opposite sex desire is sin. A man who feels an involuntary attraction to a woman who is not his wife is having a sinful response.<sup>47</sup> Burk says “ordinary means of grace” such as “prayer, the preaching of the word, and the fellowship of the saints must all be aimed at the Holy Spirit’s renewal of the inner man (2 Cor 4:16).” He denies the goal for a gay person is heterosexuality, but holiness. Yet, he clearly sees the sanctification process as attempts to rid oneself of same-sex attraction. The logical result, if not heterosexuality, is asexuality.

The short-coming of this Reformed view is not only its lack of engagement on science in relation to sanctification, but also its Docetic tone, the denial that Jesus was fully human. Christian tradition has a long history of discomfort with sexual desire, including acknowledgement of Jesus’s full humanity as a sexual being. Many church fathers viewed sexual desire as consequential to the fall. Augustine believed the prelapsarian couple would have procreated without sexual desire had they not sinned.<sup>48</sup> He attacked bishop Julian, who believed that Jesus experienced sexual desires. Significantly, Julian was eventually exiled, an indication that his positive view of sexuality was considered a distasteful minority opinion.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> For a summary of the research see Karen R. Keen, *Scripture, Ethics, and the Possibility of Same-Sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 92–94.

<sup>44</sup> J. M. Bailey, et al., “Sexual Orientation, Controversy, and Science,” *PSPI* 17 (2016): 45–101.

<sup>45</sup> Anthony F. Bogaert et al., “Male Homosexuality and Maternal Immune Responsivity to Y-linked Protein NLGN4Y,” *PNAS* 115 (2018): 302–6.

<sup>46</sup> For example, Denny Burk, “Is Homosexual Orientation Sinful?” *JETS* 58 (2015), 114–15.

<sup>47</sup> Burk, “Homosexual Orientation,” 101, 107.

<sup>48</sup> Augustine, *Nupt.* 2.20; 2:53; *Civ.* 14.26.

<sup>49</sup> William E. Phipps, *Clerical Celibacy: The Heritage* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 110–11.

The Reformers had a more upbeat view; Martin Luther referred to sexual desire (prior to marriage) as a God-given procreative drive that propels us to marriage. Yet, even he viewed the intensity of sexual desire as the result of the fall, suggesting we cannot go without marriage because the flesh has been corrupted.<sup>50</sup>

The problem with these traditional understandings of sexual desire is that they reject how God created our bodies. To assert, as some evangelicals do, that attraction to another person outside of marriage is sinful transforms puberty into a sin-inducing event. At puberty we become distinctly aware that we have sexual attraction in a particular direction. We know whether or not we are heterosexual because of *specific* (not disassociated) arousal to real, embodied males or females. As such, if Jesus was truly man, he experienced puberty with all its hormonal consequences. Since he was unmarried, any sexual attraction he experienced would have been directed to a forbidden object. Thus, the object of desire cannot be the criteria for determining what is sinful. Otherwise, we claim Jesus sinned. The alternative is to suggest Jesus was asexual, but the only reason to do so is discomfort with Jesus having a normal sexual development.

Many evangelicals intuit a problem with the Protestant conclusion that concupiscence is sin. Typically a distinction is made between temptation and sin, acknowledging the fact that Jesus was tempted (Heb 4:15) and temptation has to progress to birth before becoming sin (James 1:14–15).<sup>51</sup> Prominent evangelical organizations and individuals commonly distinguish sexual attraction from intentional lust, including Focus on the Family.<sup>52</sup> Francis Schaeffer applied this same logic to same-sex attraction, saying it was “cruel” to suggest a gay person’s involuntary attraction is sinful.<sup>53</sup>

Nevertheless, in response to Reformed pressure, the celibate gay movement has become divided in its theological views on same-sex desire and sanctification. Some Protestant LGB members are splintering sexual orientation, separating out same-sex affective/romantic attraction from sexual attraction. The neutral view of orientation as congenital is giving way to a polarized duality. Affective attraction is elevated to a gift, while sexual attraction is sinful and must be mortified.<sup>54</sup> In some ways, this is a reversion to the ex-gay view of sanctification—the belief that same-sex *sexual* attraction can be reduced through the pursuit of holiness. At the same time, the

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<sup>50</sup> Martin Luther, “Commentary on 1 Corinthians 7” in *Commentaries on 1 Corinthians 7, 1 Corinthians 15, Lectures on 1 Timothy*, Luther’s Works 28, ed. Edward Sittler (St. Louis: Concordia, 1973), 25–31.

<sup>51</sup> Kevin DeYoung, “Temptation is Not the Same as Sin,” *The Gospel Coalition*, September 26, 2013, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/temptation-is-not-the-same-as-sin/>.

<sup>52</sup> “Lust vs. Normal Sexual Desire,” *Focus on the Family Q & A* (2013), <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/family-q-and-a/sexuality/lust-vs-normal-sexual-desire/>; see also Tim Challies, “A Brief Theology of Desire,” December 24, 2010, <https://www.challies.com/christian-living/a-brief-theology-of-desire/>. Challies tells a teenage boy his sexual attractions to girls are not sin but God-designed to point him to marriage.

<sup>53</sup> Lane T. Dennis, ed., *Letters of Francis A. Schaeffer* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1985), 194.

<sup>54</sup> Wesley Hill, “Response to William Loader” and “Christ, Scripture, and Spiritual Friendship,” in *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church*, ed. Preston Sprinkle (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 55-60, 134-37.

acceptance of affective same-sex attraction functions as self-preservation, warding off debilitating shame.

### *Same-Sex Relationships and Sanctification*

In addition to attraction, the topic of sanctification relates to behavior. With wider recognition that sexual orientation does not change for most people, greater emphasis has been placed on celibacy. For most celibate LGB people, the hope of becoming attracted to the opposite sex and having a healthy heterosexual marriage has given way to reality. This raises questions about the relationship between the functions of the human body and sanctification. Specifically, is life-long celibacy possible for every person?<sup>55</sup> If not what does sanctification look like?

Martin Luther strongly argued against the feasibility of life-long celibacy: “For although we are Christians and have the spirit of God in faith, still we do not cease to be God’s creatures . . . the spirit permits the body its ways and natural functions, so that it eats, drinks, and eliminates like any other human body.”<sup>56</sup> He did not believe sanctification overrode bodily functions, including the sex drive. Luther counseled marriage as a means of sanctification. Following suit, the Westminster Larger Catechism of 1647 teaches that “entangling vows of single life” and “undue delay of marriage” are sins.<sup>57</sup> And the Reformers are not the only ones who asserted that life-celibacy is not feasible for everyone; much of Christian tradition has believed marriage is a necessary accommodation for weakness.<sup>58</sup>

Conservative evangelicals often encourage early marriage in recognition that prolonged chastity is unrealistic. Mark Regnerus, writing for *Christianity Today*, counseled “when people wait until their mid-to-late 20s to marry, it *is* unreasonable to expect them to refrain from sex. It’s battling our Creator’s reproductive designs.”<sup>59</sup> Similarly, Albert Mohler acknowledges most do not have the gift of celibacy and encourages marriage sooner than later: “Our bodies are not evolutionary accidents, and God reveals his intention for humanity through the gifts of sexual maturation, fertility, and sexual desire. As men and women, we are made for marriage.”<sup>60</sup>

In the past, when sexual orientation was believed to be changeable for most LGB people through sanctification, no serious attention was given to the infeasibility of life-long celibacy. Now faced with an uncomfortable ethical dilemma, some evangelicals are backtracking on Christian tradition by arguing that anyone who attempts it can achieve life-long celibacy. Contra Luther, sanctification can override any person’s sex drive. This new proposal is based on

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<sup>55</sup> For a detailed discussion on celibacy according to Christian tradition see chapter 6 in Keen, *Scripture, Ethics, and the Possibility of Same-Sex Relationships*.

<sup>56</sup> Luther, “Commentary on 1 Corinthians 7,” ed. Edward Sittler (St. Louis: Concordia, 1973), 25.

<sup>57</sup> Westminster Larger Catechism, Q. 139.

<sup>58</sup> Karen Keen, “Is Life-Long Celibacy Possible for Everyone? Quotes from Christian Tradition,” January 8, 2019, <https://karenkeen.com/2019/01/08/is-life-long-celibacy-possible-for-everyone-quotes-from-christian-tradition/>.

<sup>59</sup> Mark Regnerus, “The Case for Early Marriage,” *Christianity Today*, July 31, 2009, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/august/16.22.html>. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>60</sup> Albert Mohler, “The Case for (Early) Marriage,” August 3, 2009, <https://albertmohler.com/2009/08/03/the-case-for-early-marriage/>.

apparent discomfort with the implications for how LGB people should live their life. Yet it lacks clear evidence to support it.

## **Conclusions**

Socio-cultural factors in the West have affected hermeneutical frameworks in the debate on same-sex relationships. Acceptance of non-procreative marriage, egalitarian relationships, and more accurate knowledge of LGB people have led young people, including young evangelicals, to question the moral logic of the biblical prohibitions against same-sex relationships. In response, conservative evangelicals are focusing greater attention on theological anthropology and sanctification. But these efforts are not without problems. Little evidence exists for sex difference as a reflection of the *imago Dei*, and unresolved contradictions remain in traditionalist views on the relationship between the body and sanctification. These findings have implications for doctrinal development on sexuality, as well pastoral care of LGB people. Namely, opposition to covenanted same-sex relationships can be reevaluated in light of the evidence presented here.