

A REFERENDUM ON DEPRAVITY: SAME-SEX ATTRACTION AS SINFUL DESIRE

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*My conscience is without conviction or contrition,
With nothing to repent of.
My will is without power of decision or resolution.
My heart is without affection, and full of leaks.
My memory has no retention,
So I forget so easily the lessons learned,
And thy truths seep away.
Give me a broken heart that yet carries home the water of grace.*

The *Valley of Vision*, a collection of Puritan prayers edited by Arthur Bennett, has trained Christians for several generations in the daily confession of sin.¹ Rarely is the book's verse more poignant than when it considers the problem of indwelling sin in the Christian. As with much of the Protestant tradition, the Puritans understood they were shot through with iniquity.

For some time now, it has been customary to appreciate this humble spirituality. What we could call the Puritan worldview, or Puritan spirituality, has had a tremendous effect on the "big gospel" movement of the last decade of evangelical life. Included in this retrieval has been a revival of belief in the comprehensive sinfulness of humanity. Sometimes this is called "total depravity," sometimes not, but a fulsome confession of human sinfulness is quite common in mainstream evangelical life. Many agree in theory with the words of Martin Luther in the first of his famous 95 Theses: "When our Lord

¹ Arthur Bennett, *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers & Devotions* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2012 [1975]), 128–29.

and Master Jesus Christ, said ‘Repent,’ he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”²

In recent days, evangelicals have considered how this theoretical belief bears on the everyday life of the believer. A lively conversation has developed that is centered in the nature of sexual attraction, and in particular, same-sex attraction (SSA). The core issue is this: when we experience SSA, do we need to repent if we turn away from the sexual element of this desire? Some have argued that while this impulse is not ideal, neither is it sinful. It is part of our disordered post-fall condition. We need only repent when our will actively fastens on the object of desire, to use language associated with Thomas Aquinas and the Catholic moral tradition.³

I am thankful for this fruitful conversation among friends. I personally engaged in it on a scholarly level by moderating a panel of gifted evangelical theologians at the 66th annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in November 2014.⁴ In what follows, I want to build off of that profitable debate by suggesting that Scripture leads the believer to treat same-sex desire as a moral category, an impulse of the heart that calls for repentance. Our desires, I seek to show from James 1:14, are not neutral. We tempt ourselves to sin through our fallen instincts. Because of this, pastors of congregants struggling with such desires—and any like them—should lead church members to confess, repent, and seek divine mastery of these desires.

WHAT IS HOMOSEXUAL ORIENTATION?

Before we move to exegetical considerations, we need to establish a working definition of sexual orientation. The American Psychological Association (APA) has rendered the following conception:

Sexual orientation refers to an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, women, or both sexes. Sexual orientation also refers to a person’s sense of identity based on those attractions, related behaviors, and membership in a community of others who share those attractions.⁵

There is much to consider in this definition. For our purposes, we zero in on one specific aspect: the “enduring pattern” of sexual attraction expressed in the term “sexual orientation.” To simplify, an

² Martin Luther, “95 Theses,” in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, Second Edition, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 41.

³ See, for example, John J. Elmendorf, *Elements of Moral Theology: Based on the Summa Theologiae of St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: James Pott & Co., 1892), 86–96.

⁴ The panel session, entitled “Issues in Sexuality and Gender,” considered the relative sinfulness of homosexual orientation and consisted of Wesley Hill, Denny Burk, and Preston Sprinkle. Each of these men offered helpful material that sharpened my thinking on this subject. Hill and Sprinkle argue that the experience of SSA does not necessarily merit repentance, while Burk argues that it does. See, for example, Preston Sprinkle, “Is Same-Sex Attraction Sinful?,” *Patheos*, accessible at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/theologyintheraw/2014/12/is-same-sex-attraction-sinful>.

Beyond this conversation, Hill in particular has sparked the debate through his book *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010). I am deeply thankful for Hill’s clear witness about the sinfulness of homosexual behavior, a witness joined by many writers at the Spiritual Friendship site he helped start (www.spiritualfriendship.org). Hill, Julie Rodgers, Nick Roen, and numerous other talented writers together testify to the transforming power of Christ’s gospel. How encouraged I am by their collective desire to choose celibacy and exalt Christ over all earthly pleasures.

⁵ American Psychological Association, “Answers to Your Questions: For a Better Understanding of Sexual Orientation and Homosexuality,” accessible at <http://www.apa.org/topics/lgbt/orientation.pdf>.

orientation is essentially an established pattern of desire. You desire something over and over and the APA considers you to be “oriented” toward that end. This is a workable definition for our purposes.

The discussion of SSA should not revolve around whether one chooses, initially, this pattern of attraction. Many people who feel SSA testify to experiencing such desire for as long as they can remember. For a good number of people, this desire was unwanted. Those who were raised in sound biblical churches give testimony to detesting their innate attraction all the more because of the biblical witness. Despite it, however, they continued to experience SSA, no matter how much they sought to scrub it from their Christian experience. We hear these stories, which will be increasingly common in the church, and we feel great compassion for people caught in such straits.⁶

What once seemed cloudy now seems clear to many: the issue of choosing sin is not ultimately in our moral deliberations. Many who seek to follow Christ feel SSA without any predetermined act of the will. It is a natural part of their experience.⁷ The crucial matter before the church today is not primarily the precise physio-psychological origin of SSA, but rather the church’s response to it.⁸

This is a theological issue, to be sure. But it also has profound pastoral implications. When people share this struggle with their pastor, what should the pastor say? Here are some responses that we have heard in recent days:

- “That’s fine; it’s a natural part of who you are.”
- “Your SSA is disordered, but since it’s innate, you don’t have to repent of it.”
- “Acting on homosexual desire is wrong, but it’s not wrong to feel that desire.”
- “That’s just your orientation. Orientation isn’t sinful. Desire is.”⁹

⁶ In fact, we do not only feel sympathy-from afar. We may not experience SSA personally or regularly, but we all have sin problems that bedevil us and that we struggle, over months or years or even decades, to defeat. This constitutes one of my primary concerns with the “gay Christian” movement, in fact. While seeking to minister grace to Christians who face SSA, it ironically seems to distance them from the body, rendering them a special category of sinner (and saint). While I recognize the initial impulse, I worry that it leads to an unfortunate result that ends up countering the witness of God’s Word. 1 Cor 6:9–11, for example, does not identify any one group of sinners as more damaged or more privileged than any other. Sinners of varying sin-patterns are listed. The swindler is as far from God as the homosexual; the greedy businessman is as inherently evil as the adulterer.

It is true that human cultures sometimes elevate and are drawn to certain sins. Our modern culture, for example, has made an idol out of sexuality. But we must be very careful in our terminology and our theology to not make the mistake of baptizing cultural distinctions when Scripture counts us all equally guilty in Adam. Thankfully, per the witness of 1 Cor 6:9–11, we know that no matter what our pre-Christ past was like, and no matter what our present struggles with sin are, we are all washed, justified, and sanctified by God in Christ through the Spirit. This, and no other, is our identity. See Owen Strachan, “Should the Church Speak of Gay Christians?,” *Journal for Biblical Manhood* 19.1, accessible at <http://cbmw.org/journal/19-1-spring-2014>.

⁷ For further commentary on the development of this understanding of orientation in a conservative Christian approach to homosexuality, see the message by R. Albert Mohler, Jr. entitled “Aftermath” at the 2014 ERLC National Conference. The video link is here: <http://www.albertmohler.com/2014/10/29/erlc-2014-ministering-in-a-post-modern-marriage-culture>. See also the forthcoming book by Denny Burk and Heath Lambert, *Transforming Homosexuality* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2015). Denny in particular has produced a body of work on this topic that is exegetically instructive and pastorally sensitive. I am also thankful for the wisdom and counsel of Wayne Grudem, Bruce Ware, James Hamilton, Jr., Oren Martin, Mark Coppenger, Grant Castleberry, Colin Smothers, and Gavin Peacock on this topic.

⁸ For a website offering original research from a Christian worldview on this general subject, see The Institute for the Study of Sexual Identity (ISSI) at Regent University, led by Mark Yarhouse. The ISSI website is accessible at <http://www.sexualidentityinstitute.org>.

⁹ These are a representative collection of responses I have seen on Twitter, Facebook, and heard in personal conversations.

I want to suggest a different response to this vexing matter. When a church member comes to a pastor for counsel on this front, the pastor should say: “This is a battle for holiness. Your desires, just like mine, are sinful and need rewiring. Confess them to God and repent of them. This is a serious struggle, but the gospel is sufficient for these things.”

In what follows, I want to lay a foundation for this response and unpack why homosexual desire calls for repentance. I believe that James 1:14, buttressed by Matthew 5:21–30, provides the clarity the church needs on this matter.

JAMES 1:14 AND THE ENTRAPMENT OF THE WILL

James 1:13–15 lifts the hood on our hearts. In it, we peer into the awful—but arresting—process by which sin forms in the human heart:

Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

The key phrase for our purposes is that the sinner is *exelkomenos* and *deleazomenos*—“lured and enticed,” respectively, by “his own lusts” (*tēs idias epithymias*).¹⁰ This is a dark picture of how desire eventuates in sin, which eventuates in death.¹¹ Before the fallen instinct is fully manifested, before it comes to full fruition, a toxic alchemy occurs in the human will. This is not simply a “disordered” process, however. It is a sinful one.¹²

The language James uses to describe the workings of desire is not neutral. He describes each step of the process of sin-formation in moral terms. Sin first emerges when the sinner allows himself to fall prey to “his own lusts,” not those of someone else. This is directly counter to the way we frequently diagnose our evil deeds. “*I didn’t mean to hurt you*,” we say to someone we just wounded by our words. “*It wasn’t my intention to do so*.” By this we mean that we did not have a 19-point premeditated plan by which we devised a way to hurt our friends and loved ones. In this very narrow sense, we didn’t “mean” to do so.

But in another sense, James teaches us that our sinful action was indeed an act of the will. We allowed ourselves to be “lured and enticed” by our own fleshly desire. This is a chilling metaphor. We are not harmlessly drawn out-of-bounds when we allow ourselves to be tempted. Instead, we are “dragged away” in a “violent sense,” Kurt Richardson notes.¹³ The focus in James 1:14 is resolutely, even stub-

¹⁰ This word need not signal necessarily evil desire; see, for example, its usage in Luke 22:15, Phil 1:23, and 1 Thess 2:17. It refers either to moral or immoral desires, and the *telos* of the desire is crucial for understanding which form of desire is in view in a given text. The context makes clear that this it is used here of immoral desires. D. Edmond Hiebert, *James* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 93.

¹¹ Catholic scholar Patrick J. Hartin notes that this force is nothing other than “evil desire.” Idem, *James*, (Sacra Pagina Series; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 91.

¹² Ralph P. Martin notes that in the broader Greek literature, the Stoic Epictetus uses this imagery to depict the temptations of pleasure. See Idem., *James* (Word Biblical Commentary; Waco: Word Books, 1988), 36.

¹³ Kurt Richardson, *James: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture* (The New American Commentary; Nashville: Holman Reference: 1997), 81.

bornly, on our own actions. We are not hauled off by someone else's volition. We are the agent here. "We entice ourselves with the object we desire," Richardson concludes. Whether or not we are fully conscious of this process (which often occurs very quickly), we act as our own tempters and enticers.

Our sinful will, fallen because of Adam's unrighteous act, entraps us. D. Edmond Hiebert suggests that the latter term referenced above, *deleazomenos*, harkens to the enticing call of the prostitute, a call presented (and critiqued) in Proverbs 7:6–23.¹⁴ This is instructive: when we sin, the text suggests, we effectively play the role of the prostitute to *ourselves*. We fall into unrighteousness not through any external operation, but when our will "has sanctioned the performance of the sinful act," as Hiebert explains.¹⁵ It is as if our fallen instincts call out to our better nature, our new nature, to abandon our God-given virtue. With such a vivid textual portrait, the takeaway seems obvious: we regularly act as our own worst enemy.

James 1:14 shows that God does not tempt us. Though the biblical authors are well aware of Satan's influence, James does not suggest here—as in 4:7—that Satan is the problem. The picture in this particular passage is much more troubling: sin comes from within, and only from within. We bait the hook; we then, by our own lustful appetite, take the bait.¹⁶ The metaphor speaks to an inborn hunger for evil. We search for it. We are eager to tempt ourselves toward it.

This depiction of sin-formation is both good news and bad news for the Christian. Positively, it restores responsibility and moral ability to us. Negatively, it renders impermissible the central impulse of the sinful heart, namely, its ferocious appetite for self-justification. As noted above, we blame other people; we blame the weather; we even, like our father Adam, blame God himself for our failings (see Gen 3:12). James tells us differently. When we sin, it is because we want to do so. What Douglas Moo calls our "illicit desire" pushes and goads us into doing what is wrong.¹⁷ These are not someone else's illicit desires. They are, as we saw above, *tēs idias*—"our own."

Our desires, therefore, are not neutral. In James 1:13–15, they are depicted as sinful. R. V. G. Tasker makes the point concisely: "Lustful desires, as our Lord so clearly taught (Mt. v. 28), are themselves sinful even when they have not yet issued in lustful actions."¹⁸ Christopher Morgan agrees: "Sinners who sin according to their very sinful core have minds, wills, desires, actions, and attitudes shaped by such sin."¹⁹ John Calvin concurs, James "treats here of inward temptations, which are nothing else than the inordinate desires which entice to sin. For this reason James calls us to confess our own guilt, and not to implicate God."²⁰ In Calvin's handling, we cannot only identify acts and deeds as sinful; we must broaden our categories:

¹⁴ Hiebert, 93.

¹⁵ Ibid, 94.

¹⁶ See Simon Kistemaker for more on this metaphor, drawn from "the art of fishing" (49). Idem, *Exposition of the Epistle of James and the Epistles of John*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986).

¹⁷ James, 74.

¹⁸ R.V.G. Tasker, *The General Epistle of James*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 46-47.

¹⁹ Christopher W. Morgan, "Sin in the Biblical Story" in idem and Robert A. Peterson, eds. *Fallen: A Theology of Sin, Theology in Community* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 153. Morgan also quotes Philip Hughes, who notes: "there is an inner root of sinfulness which corrupts man's true nature and from which his sinful deeds spring." Hughes, "Another Doctrine Falls," *Christianity Today*, 13.17 (May 23, 1969), 13. My thanks to David Schrock for this quotation.

²⁰ John Calvin, *Commentary on James*, entry on James 1:15, accessible at <http://www.studylight.org/commentaries/cal/view.cgi?bk=jas&ch=1>.

It seems however improper and not according to the use of Scripture, to constrict the word sin to outward works, as though indeed lust itself were not a sin, and as though corrupt desires, remaining closed up within and suppressed, were not so many sins. But as the use of a word is various, there is nothing unreasonable if it be taken here, as in many other places, for actual sin.²¹

Sin cannot only be the “outward work” for Calvin. Opposing what he called the “Papist” view, the Genevan pastor argued, “Corrupt desires,” though “closed up within and suppressed,” are nonetheless “actual sin.” They call for confession and repentance. That which produces external deeds has internal roots. We are reminded of Luke 6:45, where Christ makes this very point: “The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.”²²

In James’ understanding, our lustful desires “conceive” (*syllabousa*) sin and then “bear” (*tiktei*) it (1:15). This text shows that the metaphorical child to be born is the same in the womb as out of it. Lustful desires conceive sin and then birth it. The process from start to finish is immoral. Lust is not neutral in the womb, so to speak, only to become externally evil once acted upon in concrete form. Sinful instincts pop up in us, we experience desire for an object that is ungodly, and we then produce fully-formed sinful actions.

It is wholly right to preserve the distinction between “corrupt desires” and “outward works” as Calvin is careful to do. We would not collapse internal sin into external manifestation, or else we would all be guilty of murder in a court of law, for example. But this distinction does not allow us to conclude that what takes place internally in us is morally neutral or merely disordered, as the Catholic moral tradition would have it. We are disordered by the fall, but the truth is bleaker still: as the Reformers recognized, we are sinful at our core. Sinful instincts cause us to tempt ourselves.

Because we sinfully desire to go along with this temptation, we create full-blown sinful acts. Pastor-theologian David Platt has made this very point: “the responsibility for temptation and sin lies squarely with us, for our sinful desires within give in to temptation.”²³ This sober reminder shows us afresh just how much repentance is required in the life of faith. This is not an easy cross to bear. This biblical portrait of our complicity in sin will surprise some modern evangelicals who have been taught a kinder, softer version of sin.

The church faces a wake-up call in this explosive little passage. We must not embrace evangelical spirituality without holiness anchored in a God without authority leading to a conversion without transformation.

WHAT ABOUT THE TEMPTATIONS JESUS FACED?

What about temptation, though? If the preceding interpretation is biblically faithful, does it follow that being tempted means that we are necessarily sinful? If so, then how do we avoid concluding that

²¹ Calvin, *Commentary on James*.

²² Thanks to Grant Castleberry of CBMW for this textual connection.

²³ David Platt, *Exalting Jesus in James* (ed. Platt, Daniel Akin, and Tony Merida, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary; Nashville: B&H, 2014), 10.

Jesus, who was tempted, was sinful? Sharp-thinking friends have voiced this set of concerns. These questions demand a careful response.

The form of self-temptation described in James 1:14 is a manifestly different form of temptation than what Jesus experienced when in the presence of Satan. James is mapping out for us what *internal temptation* looks like; this is a temptation that is itself sinful, for we lure ourselves to sin. Jesus never did this to himself. He surely faced the temptation to sin, but he did not experience sinful desire. This reality does not take away from the seriousness of the prospects to sin that he faced. In Matthew 4:1–11, for example, Jesus was externally tempted by his nemesis. He was confronted externally by all sorts of prospects and opportunities: the chance to lust, the chance to make himself an impressive king in worldly terms, the possibility of concluding that his cause was hopeless. In these respects, Jesus was tempted “in all things” as we are (Heb 4:15).

It is clear that as fallen sinners, we face several kinds of temptation. Even as redeemed people, we face temptation from Satan himself (James 4:7). We are tempted by a sinful world-order under the curse of darkness (Proverbs 6). We are also tempted, as James makes clear, by our own sinful nature. We wish to be delivered from this body of predatory presences in our lives. We gladly pray the words of Christ in Matthew 6:13, “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” This is not a prayer that speaks to just one experience of temptation. It speaks to our God-given desire to escape the snare of Satan, the world, and the flesh. We need divine aid to do so.

Temptation is thus not exclusively external to us nor exclusively internal. We surely face the enticement of sin from factors outside of us—Satan, the harlot, even our friends and family (Job 2:9). Such allurements are a common part of the Christian experience. We in no way sin by being tempted in such ways. There is no repentance needed when the harlot calls to us or Satan whispers to us. There is no guilt that should overtake us in such scenarios, which will regularly occur. We need not repent when temptation attempts to ambush us, as it regularly does.

But this is not the only way we face temptation. As the preceding section showed, we also tempt ourselves. As sinners, we “lure and entice” ourselves to hunger after that which is forbidden. We cannot flatly say, therefore, that temptation is morally neutral. Sometimes it is, as when Satan dangles something desirable but wrong before us. But sometimes it is not, as in the situation spelled out in James 1:14. God has not tempted us, to be sure; Satan is nowhere to be found; the fallen world-order is not dragging us violently away. We tempt ourselves, and even if our actions do not manifest in full-blown manifestations of our sinful instincts, we should repent of this self-temptation. Sometimes, when external temptation emerges, we do not initially give in to it, but then find our will weakening. We are complex creatures, and we sin far more easily than we sometimes admit.

Jesus experienced the full range of temptation offered him by a fallen world. He “knew no sin,” whether of instinct or act (2 Cor 5:21). The Scripture records no instance of him committing a sinful act, doubting God, or sinning in thought or impulse. This truth does not blunt the beauty of Christ’s mastery of temptation. It ought not discourage us or distance him from us. To the contrary, it inspires worship and thankfulness in us.

Jesus’ obedience to his Father compels us to worship him and to pray to be like him (John 15:9–10). It shows us that though fallen forces might feel stronger than our new nature, we never need to give into temptation of any kind. Jesus overcame temptation. Because of that fact, so can we.

CONNECTING JAMES 1 TO MATTHEW 5

There are many textual connections to make on this point—Pauline, Petrine, and numerous others. For the purpose of space, we will list just one connection. James 1:14 corresponds elegantly with the words of Christ in Matthew 5:21–30. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus explains that it is not only wrong to commit murder, but to be immorally angry at a brother. So too with lust. It is not only wrong to commit adultery, but to desire the sexual act in one's mind.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery,'" Jesus says, "'But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart'" (Matt 5:27–28). D. A. Carson identifies the lustful desire condemned here: it is a "deep-seated lust which consumes and devours, which in imagination attacks and rapes, which mentally contemplates and commits adultery."²⁴ This desire seeks something off-limits without respect to degree of desire. The married person who is not our spouse is completely closed to us as an object of desire, unlike our own spouse. We may be drawn toward marrying a person of the opposite sex, but this does not enfranchise our lusting after such persons. Sexual passion is only appropriate in the context of marriage.²⁵

There is thus a fundamental difference between opposite-sex attraction and same-sex attraction. One has a proper outlet; the other does not. One is acceptable if consecrated to God and not allowed to manifest in lust; the other is never acceptable. Thus we come to an important conclusion: if the object of the desire is wrong, then the desire is wrong. It is not only wrong to physically engage in homosexual acts, but to desire them. Homosexual conduct is univocally considered immoral in Scripture (see Genesis 19; Lev 18:22; Deut 23:17–18; Rom 1:26–27; 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10). There is no deviance from this portrait. If it is wrong to physically commit a homosexual act, it can only be wrong to desire that act. There is no God-glorifying outlet for a desire that fails to honor God.

It may be that such desires are few and fleeting or that they constitute a regular pattern. The frequency or the intensity of same-sex desire is not the issue. It is the experience of same-sex desire just like the experience of heterosexual lust or unrighteous anger in one's heart that calls for confession

²⁴ D. A. Carson, *Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World: An Exposition of Matthew 5-10* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 46.

²⁵ Of course, we must handle heterosexual desire with care. Though it has a proper end, marriage (unlike homosexual desire), even our good desires are tainted by sin. We cannot thus embrace "being attracted" to diverse members of the opposite sex without respect to the Pauline injunction to treat brothers and sisters with "absolute purity" (1 Tim 5:2). We may have an innate and God-given desire to marry a member of the opposite sex. This is a good desire. We will not be able to avoid being conscious of possible spouses before marriage, nor should we be. But no degree of lust is sanctioned when we possess this instinct. It is right to be drawn to a member of the opposite sex, but we have a very high standard for such engagement: absolute purity.

The biblical picture of marriage, and not the "hotness" of the opposite sex, is our starting point for understanding our God-given attractional instincts. Our churches and youth programs would benefit immensely from a reordering of the way we talk about relationships, sex, and marriage. This relates, for example, to dating. We cannot enfranchise dating relationships simply because they allow heterosexual couples to be attracted to one another. We should train boys and girls to exalt and eventually, when mature, pursue the covenant of marriage. This, and not simply any form of heterosexual coupling, is the Bible's exclusive context for sexual activity. We still have issues to sort out in terms of the experience of attraction and the proper age for marriage, but this starting point reframes the entire conversation on dating and holiness, and pushes Christian youth to desire covenantal union with all its benefits, not pseudo-marriages without biblical sanction or holy protection.

For sound words on this topic, which bears much wider discussion among sincere Christians due to the prevalence of morally disastrous dating culture, see Denny Burk, *What Is the Meaning of Sex?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

and repentance on the believer's heart. The term "orientation" cannot thus absolve a person from their moral duties before the Lord. If it refers to a pattern of illicit sexual attraction, then it demands a consequent pattern of Godward confession and repentance.

HOW TOTAL DEPRAVITY CLARIFIES OUR CONDITION

The foregoing helps us understand the complex workings of our wills. Sometimes, we are conscious of willfully choosing to sin. At other times, sin seems to strike us like a drone from the sky. We say something so cutting we're shocked into silence by our own words. We think something so foul that we're relieved that no one (human) knows our minds. A scary circumstance or trial presents itself and we're instantly awash in doubt, anxiety, and misery. These are not uncommon experiences for believers, even mature believers.

The modern church seems tempted (no pun intended) to be voluntarist in its understanding of the will. We have overemphasized sins of commission, and underemphasized what we could call sins of instinct. We need a healthy dose of Augustinianism to correct this shift. We surely do sin in discrete, plotted-out ways. But biblical Christians cannot stop there. We must recognize that we are sinful through-and-through (see Rom 3:10–18).

We cannot be voluntarists. We do not have the theological luxury of concluding that we sin only when we consciously assent to sin. Calvin spoke against this view directly in his commentary on James: "Hence is the dotage of those confuted, who conclude from these words, that sin is not mortal until it breaks forth, as they say, into an external act." For Calvin, God holds us accountable for "the completed course of sinning,"²⁶ the entire process, and not merely the outward manifestation of the inward desire. The Lord teaches us in James, "There is in us the root of our destruction." The root, no less than the finished product, owes to evil, and must be handled in such terms.

This means that we cannot affirm the biblical doctrine of depravity but then fail to repent in a holistic manner. We cannot read *The Valley of Vision* with reverence but then turn aside from confession and repentance just moments later. We cannot passionately sing worship songs that give voice to our moral failings but then fight off contrition when confronted. We cannot nod our head to sermons and conference messages that spell out how far short we fall of God's glory but then avoid apologizing in the car ride home over an unkind word. These standards are high. We are dealing with life lived before God, after all.

We cannot extol repentance from the pulpit but flinch from it in our living room. If, on every single day of our lives, we do not worship God as we ought, we do not repent as we ought, we do not pray as we ought, we do not read our Bibles as we ought, we do not love our neighbor as we ought, we do not care for the body of Christ as we ought, we do not look on brothers and sisters with absolute purity as we ought, then we should repent in a comprehensive way. This is true of each and every day that we live.

This is the takeaway of "total depravity" or some concomitant formulation for the believer. Sin is not our master, but it is our companion. When we are pulled toward it through fallen desire, we should repent. The whole of the Christian life, Luther reminds us, is repentance. Repentance is not the exception, then. It is the rule.

²⁶ Calvin, James, entry on James 1:15.

HOPE FOR SINNERS OF EVERY KIND

Some people who have engaged the conversation over “gay Christianity” have argued that this reality, if true, breeds discouragement. It surely can. These passages force us to confront in a fresh and deadly serious way the specter of our immorality. We are worse than we know. We are more sinful than we like to admit in polite society.

The bogeyman in our day, as in every era, is not one particular sin. It is not SSA. SSA is just one aspect of the much larger problem: indwelling sin. People with SSA are not a special group. They are not particularly evil. They are just like every other believer who faces temptation of varying kinds. They do not need a special dispensation to deal with their lust; they do not need a different gospel. Every believer should lead a life of continual repentance of both act and desire. Every believer will find unbelievable power and fresh forgiveness in the gospel of grace. There is one enemy of us all: sin. There is one conqueror of that sin: Christ.

Whatever our fleshly battle, the death of Christ has broken the power of sin (Rom 6:6). We have a new nature, and we are a new creation in Christ (Rom 6:6; 8:12; 2 Cor 5:17).²⁷ We must battle the flesh, putting it to death, but we will also know significant victory as we embrace the cruciform power of salvation. Carson says it well: “We are to deal drastically with sin. We must not pamper it, flirt with it, enjoy nibbling a little of it around the edges.” We cannot explain it away, excuse it, or downplay it: instead, “We are to hate it, crush it, dig it out,” he concludes.²⁸ This speaks to the work of the pastor. He must lead his people to see that they cannot trifle with sinful desire or act, but must put both to death by the power of the gospel (Col 3:5).

CONCLUSION

As noted above, our conversation over SSA is not an end in itself. It is a referendum on pervasive depravity. Do we believe it? Or will we embrace moral voluntarism, which leaves a place for sin in our lives, but overlooks our smaller, quieter, inborn instincts? People who love the Bible cannot do so. We recognize that we dishonor God through “sins of presumption,” by premeditation and forethought, but also through “hidden sins,” the quiet impulses of our old nature that instinctively rise up in us (see Ps 19:12–13).²⁹ We cannot be voluntarists, in the sense that we only locate transgression in the conscious act of the will. We must also be “instinctualists,” seeing our iniquity in even the inborn desires of our heart.

The nature of object is crucial here. If we desire that which is wrong in itself, then we sin. We might even have the best of intentions. Uzzah certainly did, but Uzzah had the wrong object in view. He was struck dead for missing the mark (2 Sam 6:6–7). If we allow ourselves to go on desiring sinful and fallen things, we too will miss the mark. We will grieve the Lord (Eph 4:30).

This we must not do. We should instead return to the old paths. Repentance is only joy squelching if you believe that God exists solely to affirm you. True believers are by no means miserable. But we are sober and watchful when it comes to our sin. We see, by divine grace, that repentance is both necessary and a means to delight. We do not want to remain in our sinful patterns. We want to identify

²⁷ See Heath Lambert’s *Finally Free: Fighting for Purity with the Power of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013). *My own Risky Gospel: Abandon Fear and Build Something Awesome* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013) has several chapters on the power of the cross as the conqueror of our daily evils.

²⁸ D. A. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount: An Exposition of Matthew 5–7* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1994), 49.

²⁹ I am grateful to Brian Payne for pointing out this text, and its crucial distinction.

them, repent of them, and with God's help leave them. We want not only to cease sinful acts, but to take every thought captive (2 Cor 10:5). This necessarily entails that we confess and repent of our very thoughts and the desires that influence them.

To do so, we must recover a strong doctrine of sin grounded in a robust doctrine of God. Sin is not merely self-violence. It is an infinite offense to our holy Father. We do well to recover the prayers of old, which captured this perspective, and which left no place for excusing sin of any kind, whether inborn or premeditated.

Perhaps the *Book of Common Prayer* (1662) will help us to find the old paths once more:

ALMIGHTY and most merciful Father;
We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep.
We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts.
We have offended against thy holy laws.
We have left undone those things which we ought to have done;
And we have done those things which we ought not to have done;
And there is no health in us.
But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders.
Spare thou them, O God, which confess their faults.
Restore thou them that are penitent; According to thy promises
declared unto mankind in Christ Jesus our Lord.
And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake; That we may
hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life,
To the glory of thy holy Name.
Amen.