

# BIBLICAL COUNSELING AND HETEROSEXUALITY

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## BACK TO BASICS

In 1961 the Green Bay Packers were leading in the fourth quarter of the championship game for the National Football League. Late in the game, just moments from victory, they squandered the lead and lost to the Philadelphia Eagles. It was heartbreaking to come so close to one of their sport's highest honors to see it vanish before their eyes. The team spent the off-season nursing their grudges, determining to do better, and wondering what their coach would have planned at the start of the next season to help them improve their game.

Their coach was Vince Lombardi, and he too had been thinking about how to help his team advance their game. His plan, however, was a surprise to members of the Green Bay Packers. On the very first day of training camp, Lombardi walked into the room ready to address his team for the very first time in the season. Standing in the room full of some of the best players in the NFL, he extended his hand that held the oblong leather ball for which his sport was named and declared, "Gentlemen, this is a football."<sup>2</sup> Lombardi then spent the entire season hammering away with his team on the basics of blocking and tackling. The instruction often felt so basic that members of the team would jokingly request that he please slow down. Lombardi was convinced, however, that the path to victory was found in mastering fundamentals that others took for granted. His conviction paid off. Six months later the Packers shut out the New York

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<sup>2</sup> David Maraniss, *When Pride Still Mattered: A Life of Vince Lombardi* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 2000), 274.

Giants 37-0 to win the championship game. This now famous account serves as a constant reminder that basics matter.

## THE JOURNEY BACK TO BASICS

Basics matter in biblical counseling as well as in football. If Lombardi's journey to recover the basics traced back to the 1961 NFL championship, this journey back to basics goes back to the 2015 annual conference of the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors (ACBC). The theme of the conference that year focused on homosexuality. That was the year that Obergefell v. Hodges changed the nationwide landscape of homosexuality and marriage, and many Christian ministries were highlighting the sin of homosexuality. The difference between the ACBC conference and many other Christian conferences, however, had to do with the theme of homosexuality and change. Whereas most of the evangelical conferences on the topic were highlighting the ethics of homosexuality, the ACBC conference was emphasizing ministry to people struggling with homosexuality, and how to help them change.

In preparation for that conference, I engaged in careful research regarding reparative therapy and read numerous resources on the topic. My concern was that even within biblical counseling there was an instinct to engage in integration on this topic and assume that reparative therapy was a biblical rather than secular approach to change. My research on reparative therapy led to many serious concerns about this secular approach to care which I have chronicled in other places. But one of my many concerns was regarding the secular goal of reparative therapy.

The goal of reparative therapy is that of replacing homosexual desires with heterosexual desires. None other than the founder of reparative therapy, Joseph Nicolosi, makes this quite clear, "As shame is slowly diminished in therapy and the same-sex attracted man grows in self-awareness and self-assertion, he should gradually begin to find within himself a naturally heterosexual response."<sup>3</sup> One of my most consistent critiques of reparative therapy was that this goal was unbiblical

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<sup>3</sup>Joseph J. Nicolosi, *Shame and Attachment Loss: The Practical Work of Reparative Therapy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 324.

and wrong. In *Transforming Homosexuality: What the Bible Says about Sexual Orientation and Change*, which I wrote with Denny Burk, I argued this way:

In Scripture, same-sex attraction and behavior are repeatedly and consistently condemned. Because of that reality, it is possible to wrongly assume that opposite-sex attraction and behavior are repeatedly endorsed. In fact, this is not the case. The Bible never portrays heterosexuality in general to be a good thing. There is not one place in the entire Bible where men and women are commanded to have sexual desire for the opposite sex indiscriminately. The biblical norm for our sexual lives is chastity outside of marriage and fidelity within marriage. Thus, the marriage covenant provides the norm for our sexual lives, not heterosexuality as an identity category.<sup>4</sup>

Obviously, Christian marriage is a heterosexual institution insofar as it is reserved for one man and one woman but endorsing marriage as a heterosexual institution and setting apart our sexual desires as being exclusively reserved for this union is a very different argument than stating that all sexual desires are praiseworthy merely for being focused on the opposite sex.

I made a similar argument in an article entitled, “Oil and Water: The Impossible Relationship Between Evangelicalism and Reparative Therapy”:

Contrary to the teaching of reparative therapists, heterosexual desire is not a virtue in and of itself. The biblical teaching is more sophisticated, calling for purity and chastity, rather than the cultivation of general heterosexual desire. People who struggle with homosexuality change by pursuing the goal of chastity, which means fighting to eradicate any sexual desire outside of marriage, and fighting to cultivate exclusive sexual desire for one’s spouse within marriage.<sup>5</sup>

The argument I made then, and still believe now to be the biblical position, is that sexual desire must always be directed toward one’s opposite-sex partner in

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<sup>4</sup> Denny Burk and Heath Lambert, *Transforming Homosexuality: What the Bible Says about Sexual Orientation and Change* (P&R: Phillipsburg, NJ, 2015) 74-75.

<sup>5</sup> Heath Lambert, “Oil and Water: The Impossible Relationship Between Evangelicalism and Reparative Therapy” ACBC Essays, Vol. I (2017): 12.

marriage, not that one should pursue heterosexual desires in general as argued by reparative therapists.

This argument created some difficulty. I have been criticized many times, but in my writing about homosexuality, I received some of the staunchest criticism in my ministry up to that time. My arguments critical of the heterosexual goal of reparative therapy was an example of criticism I received from the right. There were countless anecdotal examples of critiques from conservative biblical counselors. Many ACBC members and Fellows wrote to me and called with significant questions. Even one board member reached out to express serious concern. All of these conversations were fruitful and ended well, but it proved that integration can creep in even in the most conservative of places. It also showed that at least a portion of my argument against reparative therapy was jarring even to the most biblically faithful.

The most strenuous arguments I received from the right, however, were not from biblical counselors, but from members of the ex-gay population. Over the course of several months, I spoke with many of the leading voices in the ex-gay movement. These men and women prevailed upon me repeatedly to stop criticizing reparative therapy in general, and, in particular, to desist from the argument that heterosexuality was unbiblical. I am not aware of any person in the ex-gay movement that I was able to persuade that my argument reflected the biblical position. In one notable example, none less than Robert Gagnon argued at a meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society that my “insane” position was “giving aid and comfort to the enemy.” He could not understand why someone who opposed homosexuality as I clearly as I did would apparently undermine the faithful arguments of those he believed to be theologically correct.<sup>6</sup>

In an equal but opposite way, I was stupefied that an argument that seemed to me to be so clearly and patently biblical could not be understood. In spite of that misunderstanding, however, I would state the matter even more strongly and say that it is an elementary matter of biblical fidelity that the Scriptures do not require, but rather condemn general heterosexual desire as a moral good, and instead require that no sexual desires of any kind should be exercised until they

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Gagnon, “Why Christians Should Not Throw Reparative Therapy Under the Bus”, Paper at Evangelical Theological Society (ETS: November 18, 2015).

exist in the exclusive confines of Christian marriage.

In what follows I will advance three biblical arguments that clarify for Christians that the Bible condemns the general heterosexuality as a goal of biblical change.

## THE COMMANDS AGAINST ADULTERY

One of the earliest indicators in Scripture that general heterosexual desire is not good are the commands in Scripture against adultery. The simple clarity of the seventh commandment demands, “You shall not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14; Deuteronomy 5:18). The command makes clear that any sexual expression outside of marriage is wrong, even when it is heterosexual in nature.

Perhaps the most dramatic way this principle is demonstrated is in Proverbs with the language of the forbidden woman,

For the lips of the forbidden woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil, but in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps follow the path to Sheol. (Proverbs 5:3-5)

Two things are true of the forbidden woman in this passage. The first is that she is alluring. The language of lips that drip honey and speech that is smoother than oil is a graphic way of describing how enticing she is. This woman is forbidden, but not unappealing. This explains the sinful appeal of sexuality. It is a warning that sin can masquerade as a good thing, which goes a long way towards explaining the deception of reparative therapy regarding the virtue of general heterosexual desire.

The second truth is that one reason the woman is forbidden is that she is dangerous. The language in the text not only describes the appealing nature of the woman, but also her danger and deadliness. Her feet are described as following the path towards death and the grave. The people of God are commanded to stay away from the forbidden woman because she is a poison apple. These truths are clear proof of the sinfully dangerous logic of general heterosexual desire. It makes

a great deal of sinful sense to seek the forbidden woman because of her appeal. This search, however, is dangerous and ultimately deadly. Anyone who pursues a heterosexual encounter outside the exclusive bonds of marriage will come to regret it. This reality remains true even when that sinful search is meant to replace other sinful desires such as homosexuality.

## THE COMMANDS AGAINST LUST

It is not necessary to leave the ten commandments before finding more proof of the sinfulness of general heterosexual desire,

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's. (Exodus 20:17; Deuteronomy 5:21)

This commandment functions as an internalization of the seventh commandment. As it does with the other commandments, it brings God's law into the heart. The seventh command stipulates that any heterosexual behavior outside of marriage is ungodly. The tenth commandment makes the same principle true for what one desires. Jesus, of course, fulfills this teaching in his Sermon on the Mount, "Everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28).

It is good to remember that in Jesus' teaching the word rendered lust is the general Greek word for desire, *epithumeō*. In some contexts, this word communicates a morally good desire. For example, the Apostle Paul makes it clear, using the same term, that a person who desires the work of pastor desires a noble task (1 Timothy 3:1). What makes a desire good or evil is the object of desire. Desire focused on a moral good is praiseworthy. Desire focused on a moral evil is blameworthy.

Moses in the ten commandments and Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount make it clear that it is wrong to have any kind of sexual desire for a person other than a spouse. This is an obvious refutation that general heterosexuality is a moral good.

Instead, purity happens when one's heterosexual desire is aimed only at a spouse. Any other heterosexual desire is condemned both by Moses and Jesus.

## THE COMMAND FOR MARITAL INTIMACY

Each of the previous two realities are framed in a negative context. General heterosexuality is condemned in the Bible because any sexual attitude or action aimed outside of marriage is condemned. The argument here is more positive, condemning general heterosexual desire because of what the Bible commends. God's message in Scripture not only contains what His people must avoid, but also makes clear what His people should embrace. God makes the positive direction of desire clear when He commands His people, "Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love" (Proverbs 5:18-19).

In a prurient culture, it is easy to miss how deeply and sexually intimate Proverbs 5 is. The language demands that a man must be filled with sexual delight at the thought of the breasts of his wife. In a Bible that forbids drunkenness, here is a command to be intoxicated by the sexual relationship of marriage. But there is more. This joy, delight, and intoxication is not directed at the sexual pleasure from just any woman. This command is not one for general heterosexual desire. The command is to find sexual delight exclusively in the confines of marriage.

King Solomon reigned over Israel at its zenith of global political power. He also may have been the most heterosexual man in human history! Solomon's unchecked heterosexuality led to his condemnation in the text of Scripture,

Now King Solomon loved many foreign women, along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the people of Israel, 'You shall not enter into marriage, with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods.' Solomon clung to these in love. He had 700 wives, who were princesses, and 300 concubines. And his wives turned away his heart. (1 Kings 11:1-3)Ω

There are two criticisms of Solomon embedded in this passage. The first regards the sinful syncretistic worship practices that Solomon's many wives brought into his heart and life. The second, however, is the sheer number of wives Solomon took. In a moral universe, where God demands that each man must have one wife, Solomon's hundreds of wives serve as a severe shock to our moral imagination. And the condemnation he received (Nehemiah 13:26) is a remarkable demonstration that the Bible even condemns some kinds of heterosexual marriage, as it does here and in other prohibitions against marrying one who is not one of God's people (2 Corinthians 6:14). The Bible condemns heterosexual practices that happen apart from the exclusive confines of marriage with one man and one woman. This is yet one more clear rejection of the goodness of general heterosexuality.

## CLARIFYING THE BASICS

These three considerations help us understand the appropriate way to understand the issue of heterosexuality. I would not want to be misunderstood to believe that any notion of heterosexuality is to be completely rejected. My contention that general heterosexual desire is not a moral good, and therefore not the goal of faithful counseling does not mean there is not a proper way to think of heterosexuality. In fact, heterosexuality is important in at least two ways.

First, heterosexuality characterizes the institution of marriage. As I have made clear, the Bible affirms that marriage is between one man and woman (Genesis 2:24). This means that, even though Christians must reject general heterosexual desire, we must affirm that marriage is a heterosexual institution, and can never be a homosexual one. The only marriages that are acceptable are the ones, therefore, that happen in the framework of heterosexual marriages.

Second, heterosexuality characterizes the only appropriate kind of sexual desire. Sexual desire, in order to be biblical, must be characterized by at least two realities. First, sexual desire must be in the confines marriage. Second, sexual desire must be toward the opposite sex partner in marriage. Heterosexual desire is the only kind of desire that is potentially honorable. Homosexual desire, on the other hand, can never be qualified in such a way to make it morally acceptable. It will, instead, always be wrong.

The case I am making here is much more careful than the one that reparative therapy seeks to make. Statements like the ones from Nicolosi never qualify heterosexual desire, but rather celebrate any heterosexual expression of desire as a counseling success and the presence of righteousness. Christians cannot afford to think in such dangerous and sinful ways.

What all of this means is that heterosexuality is not an absolute good, in and of itself, but is a potential and qualified good. In a sinful world, fallen people can take this potential good and corrupt it in any number of ways. In a broken world that reality is true for many other potential goods. Another issue that is relevant for biblical counseling regards the use of our words. We know that language has great potential to be good but is not an absolute good because it can be corrupted in so many ways. Words that would otherwise be good can be corrupted by being spoken at the wrong time, with the wrong motivation, to the wrong person, and in various other contexts that would corrupt them. It is the same with prayer. The potential good of prayer can be corrupted by praying out of accord with God's revealed will, by selfish motivations, and by the absence of faith. So it is with heterosexuality. Because it is a potential moral good, biblical counselors can never point to its general expression as a good in and of itself, but must be clear that it is qualified by other biblical truths in order to be commended.

## **THE PRACTICALITY AND HUMILITY OF GETTING BACK TO BASICS**

The observations in this essay are crucial for a very practical reason. The history of reparative therapy has not proven to be an impressive one. I will not document here what I have shown in other places, but the heyday of reparative therapy seems to have passed. Much of that is because of shifting cultural values in favor of homosexuality. It also has to do with the poor record of reparative therapy. The therapy has not worked.

The observation that reparative therapy is ineffective is an important one that we must make with great caution. It is dangerous to consider the value of any counseling intervention based on effectiveness alone. That is true because counseling requires more than just a faithful counseling model implemented by

a skilled counselor. In order for counseling to be effective there must not only be a faithful counseling model communicated by a faithful counselor, but there must also be a willing counselee who listens carefully and works diligently to implement what they have learned. This reality means that the best counseling interventions in the world will experience failure whenever they are met with an unwilling counselee.

It is possible that the ineffectiveness of reparative therapy is based on the failure of counselees to implement the counseling instruction. That means the primary mechanism for an evaluation of any therapeutic intervention must be the text of Scripture. Christians must use the Scriptures to evaluate whether the theory of any counseling intervention is sound or faithless. As I have tried to show here, the Bible is unequivocal about the unbiblical mission of reparative therapy to pursue general heterosexuality as the goal of counseling.

But what about the success of reparative therapy? It has been demonstrated that reparative therapists do have some successes.<sup>7</sup> Some simply refuse to consider this evidence, but this is not an option for faithful Christians. Indeed, the Scriptures give us a way to understand the effectiveness of unbiblical counseling approaches.

Faulty counseling interventions can often achieve a kind of success. For example, a former pastor at the church I serve was accustomed to motivating teenage boys to abstinence with the absolute guarantee that premarital sex would lead to a sexually transmitted disease. He would often describe these diseases in horrifying detail. This method often worked as I have learned from many in my church years after they heard this counsel. Many boys headed the counsel and remained celibate until marriage. But biblical counselors would express high levels of concern at using motivations of fear and misleading information as the basis for change. A theory can achieve a kind of “success” without being based on biblical principles.

Thus, the Bible makes sense of the successes and failures of reparative therapy by pointing us to the importance that counseling must have a biblical goal in order to achieve the kind of success that honors God. This means Christians have a very

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<sup>7</sup> Stanton L. Jones and Mark A. Yarhouse, *Homosexuality: The Use of Scientific Research in the Church's Moral Debate* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000) 117-152.

practical reason to be clear that the counseling goal for persons struggling with homosexuality is not heterosexuality, but purity. Any failure of reparative therapy will be, in part, to pursuing a goal that God has not ordained. Any “success” will be based on a faulty goal and will ultimately prove to be unhelpful. Biblical counselors must be motivated by practical care to show struggling people a better way.

But this elementary understanding of the sinfulness of general heterosexuality also encourages humility on the part of everyone with sexual sin. The Bible makes clear that any sexual desire, even when it is heterosexual, is sinful in every case unless it is directed toward one’s spouse in marriage. This means that heterosexuals have no ground for sexual boasting. Indeed, when you understand the basics, you see that every heterosexual has just as many sins as homosexuals. Heterosexual people sin in countless ways. Whenever we fail to have sexual desire for our spouses, when we pursue pornography, adultery, fornication, lust, and flirtation we demonstrate ourselves to be sinners. Whether homosexual or heterosexual we are all sexual deviants hating what God loves and loving what God hates. We all need the grace of Jesus to forgive us our sins and empower us to live with the chastity that he not only commands, but empowers to achieve.

That is my argument. It is not complex or novel, but it is important. Years ago when I first made it, I received too much criticism to assume otherwise. I want to take responsibility for that criticism. I took for granted that everyone would naturally see that my argument was correct. This was a failure on my part, which I wish to correct here. I needed to slow down and take more care in the argument. I have tried to do that here in demonstrating from Scripture that the pursuit of general heterosexual desire is not a moral good in itself, but is a sin. My desire has been to hold aloft the biblical portrait of sexuality, just as Vince Lombardi held aloft that football so many decades ago, and in declaring the obvious make an argument of crucial significance for our work as biblical counselors.