

Homosexuality and the Christian – Yarhouse book summary

Part One: The Big Picture

1. What does God think about homosexuality?

a) Sources of Authority

- Scripture: *creation, the fall, redemption, glorification*
- Christian Tradition: *Roman Catholicism, Protestantism*
- Reason (science): *Commonness¹ of homosexuality? Causes? Mental health issue? Changeability?*
- Personal Experience

b) What Sources of Authority Do You Emphasize?

c) Conclusion

- “Unfortunately, the question blurs the distinction between the person and their actions.”
- “Our conclusion is that homosexual behavior is not appropriate for the Christ-follower... But there is also a pastoral piece to this discussion... God is very active in our lives, identifying with us in our longings and struggles... He came to fill suffering with his nearness.”^{pp.35-35}

Take-Home Points
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Avoid proof-texting from Scripture.• A biblical understanding of sexuality and sexual behavior should reflect the four acts of the biblical drama.• Four general sources of authority• Personal experience should include both those who want to change the church's teachings & those who want live in sync with the church's teachings• Everyone favors one or two sources of authority over others—which do you favor and why?

2. Why is sexual identity at the heart of the matter?

a) What is sexual identity?

- “Sexual identity is how you label yourself by your sexual preferences.”^{p.38}
- “Think about what might contribute to how you would label yourself publicly and privately (e.g. attractions, biology, beliefs, pressures, expectations, social norms).”^{p.39}

b) A Three-Tier Distinction

- Same-sex *attraction* – “the most descriptive way people talk about their feelings”
- Homosexual *orientation* – a same-sex attraction that is strong, durable, persistent.
- Gay *identity* – Talking about a gay *identity* is part of a contemporary movement.^{p.42}

c) When and how does sexual identity occur?

- “same-sex sexual identity in women usually happens when a girl realizes she is attracted to a female friend, whereas same-sex identity in men often happens following purely sexual encounters.”^{p.44}
- “sexual identity doesn’t just turn on or off—it emerges through a developmental process that begins typically with attraction, then it leads to a behavior of some kind.”
- “researchers agree that young people who experience ssa go through 3 stages: *identity dilemma, identity development, identity synthesis*”

d) The gay script

- “Scripts” reflect the expectations of our culture in terms of how we are supposed to live and how we should relate and behave. And young people who experience same-sex attraction (SSA) similarly look for a script to read from...much of the gay community is ready to hand Chris a “gay” script. Here’s what I think this script looks like:
 1. SSA signals a naturally occurring distinction (i.e. *categorically* different from heterosexuality)
 2. SSA is the way you know who you “really are” as a person (emphasis on *discovery*).

¹ “Whether something is common or rare is a separate issue from whether it is wrong.” P.30

3. SSA is at the core of who you are as a person.
4. Same-sex behavior (SSB) is an extension of that core.
5. Self-actualization (SSB) of your sexual identity is crucial for your fulfillment.

e) Another script for Christians: identity “in Christ”

- Many Christians have chosen not to let their attractions determine their identity. An “identity in Christ” script (vs. the “gay” script) has these basic points:
 1. SSA does not signal a categorical distinction among types of person, but is one of many human experiences that are “not the way it’s supposed to be.”
 2. SSAs may be part of your experience, but they are not the defining element of your identity.
 3. You can choose to integrate your experiences of attraction to the same sex into a gay identity.
 4. On the other hand, you can choose to center your identity around other aspects of your experience, including your biological sex, gender identity, and so on.
 5. The most compelling aspect of personhood for the Christian is one’s identity in Christ, a central and defining aspect of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.
- This script relies on the metaphor of *integration* rather than *discovery*. (choices to be made^{p.78})

f) Final thoughts on sexual identity

- “SSA may be...an unchosen characteristic that can contribute in some way to identity, but there are also [other] aspects of identity...people have choices to make regarding what they believe about sexuality, sexual identity, and sexual behavior. These choices will lead them to different communities that, in turn, confirm and consolidate a sense of this sexual identity into who they are.”^{p.53}

3. What causes homosexuality?

a) Questions That Matter to Families Today

- The question “What causes homosexuality?” is one of those areas where recognizing what we know and don’t know is likely to be the best we can do right now.^{p.59}

b) An Awkward Question for the Church

- “Although I disagree with those in the gay community who advance the conclusion that nature is the sole cause of homosexuality, I also disagree with Christians who take the position that it is all nurture. Both groups are most likely wrong.”^{p.60} “There are multiple pathways to a particular person experiencing ssa or a homosexual orientation.”^{p.62}

c) What Could Contribute to Homosexuality?

1. Biology (areas of the brain, twin studies, fraternal birth order, animal models, genetic studies)
2. Childhood Experiences (psychoanalytic theory, childhood sexual experiences)
3. Environmental Influences
4. Adult Experiences

d) Conclusion

- “There is no consensus among scientists about the exact reasons that an individual develops a heterosexual, bisexual, gay, or lesbian orientation....Many think that nature and nurture both play complex roles; most people experience little or no sense of choice about their sexual orientation.”^{p.79}

4. Can someone change sexual orientation?

- “The American Psychological Association’s recently reviewed and published a background document from a taskforce that reviewed many of these studies. They concluded that there was ‘insufficient evidence’ to support claims of change in sexual orientation.”^{p.82}

a) Early Studies of Change (1960s & 1970s) – “different ways to define success & change”^{p.84}

b) More Recent Studies

- “What can we conclude about attempts to change sexual orientation? I think those who argue that there is “insufficient evidence”...are often thinking of categorical and complete change.^{p.89} I think it may be helpful to everyone involved to recognize that 180-degree change or categorical change is less likely.”^{p.90}

c) Is It Harmful to Try to Change?

- In part it depends on one’s expectations and the focus of the counseling (e.g. changing *identity* vs. changing *orientation* or *attractions*) Hoping for a categorical shift, when “categorical shifts are rare” means there will be “greater potential disappointment” that “can be accompanied by feelings of guilt (for not feeling that he’s tried hard enough or had enough faith), shame (for feeling that there is something wrong with him), anger, and so on.”

d) Conclusion

- it appears that most people will not change their orientation, if by that we mean moving from “completely gay” to “completely straight.” But change can occur along a continuum.

Take-Home Points
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Although some people do experience a change in sexual orientation, most experience modest gains, and many share that they continue to have same-sex attractions at times. • It does not appear to be intrinsically harmful to try to change sexual orientation, especially if a person has realistic expectations. • Where people may struggle the most is with unrealistic expectations or messages that they are not trying hard enough or do not have enough faith.

Part Two: Honest Answers to Questions Facing Families

5. What if my child or teen announces a gay identity?

a) Is My Child Gay?

- The first question is fueled by parents being worried about...what their own lives will be like, as well as the lives of their children.
- Often there is shame as well...seeds of shame are often planted when a parent first fears that a son or daughter might be gay^{p.101}
- What causes gender nonconformity and how should parent’s respond? “Since we don’t know what causes ssa, it makes it more difficult to know what to say to parents about prevention.
- Parents can work at decreasing their own anxiety, be more involved with their child, ignore some behaviors & gently redirect others without overreacting, express love and support.

b) What If My Teen Announces a Gay Identity?

1. Describe Rather Than Declare (e.g. “I experience ssa” vs. “I’m gay” & Is your teen saying “I am gay and want you to know who I really am” or “I experience ssa and am sorting out what that means”?)
2. Keeping the Long View in Mind (i.e. Take a longer view than what is happening *right now*, be available to your teen as they are sorting out sexual identity issues, recognizing that where they are today may not be where they are a year from now or five...or ten years from now.)
3. What About the Needs of the Parents? (e.g. guilt, fear, grief...There may be dreams that are lost and need to be grieved, but parents should also focus on supporting one another and their teen, identifying trustworthy resources while also recognizing that challenging questions may arise.)
4. Phil Revisited (Having a practical discussion of life in their home...find a way to respect each other. It wasn’t that Phil was choosing to experience ssa, but he did have choices to make now—choices about his behavior and identity. His parents had choices to make too.)

Take-Home Points
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is no one cause of homosexuality, including your relationship with your child. • Gender nonconformity is probably the most consistent experience adults with a homosexual orientation report from their childhood. • If your teen discloses same-sex attraction, stay calm and listen, keeping in mind the obstacles that get in the way of listening. • Remember that your teen was aware of his or her same-sex attractions long before you knew about it. Give yourself time to process.

6. My adult child announced a gay identity: what now?

- a) What Now? – “What they often believe about the church is that they would be rejected out of hand...When I meet with parents in these circumstances, I encourage them to set a tone of mutual respect by listening.”
- b) Learning to Listen – “The more you model good listening and extend that to your adult child, the more you can expect your child to extend that same courtesy to you....Listening isn’t the only thing parents can do, but it is an important first step.”
- c) Know What You Believe – “it is better to speak positively about what you believe than negatively about what you are against.”
 1. *Scripture and Related Spiritual Issues* – Many adult children have often read or are at least familiar with recent attempts to interpret Scripture in a more gay-affirming way. I encourage parents to be familiar with this literature in order to come to an understanding of what their child has been reading, and to also get to know critiques of those views.^{p.126}
 2. *Setting Limits* – It is one thing to discuss your beliefs and values...The most challenging thing of all is making decisions that reflect those values and affect your adult child (e.g. what they do and do not allow at family gatherings, holidays, and other events). I tell parents that they are naturally inclined to see limit setting from their own point of view...But try to see the limit-setting from your adult child’s perspective...you are not the only person to consider.
 3. *Take Care of Yourself and Your Marriage* – There is a tendency for parents to polarize when an adult child announces a gay identity (e.g. anger from one parent and love from the other). I encourage couples to develop a social support structure (pastor, counselor, family members, friends) with whom they both feel comfortable sharing what is happening in their lives.
- d) Where is God in All of This? - Parents feel confused about what is going on and where God is in their circumstances. This is common. Be transparent before God, he won’t abandon us.
- e) How Will it End Up? – Most often parents and their adult children work out a relationship based upon mutual understanding and respect...take a long view...keeping lines of communication open with your child, and being honest and transparent about your own life.
- f) Conclusion – Listening nurtures understanding and lays a foundation for future discussions.

7. What if my spouse announces a gay identity?

- a) Mixed-Orientation Marriages – are marriages in which one spouse is a sexual minority (i.e. experiences ssa regardless of identity label) and the other partner is heterosexual.
- b) Stages of Relationship Change – The details of how to work through this are unique yet in general are: *awareness, emotional response, acceptance of reality, and negotiating a future.*
- c) Recommendations for Couples
 1. A Word to the Sexual-Minority Spouse
 - Describe attractions rather than identify with them
 - Explore the question: What do these attractions mean?
 - What weight do I give to the other parts of who I am?
 2. A Word to the Spouse of the Sexual Minority – it takes a minimum of one year to really work through interpersonal trauma. The spouse who feels deceived (or betrayed) typically works through the following stages: (1) impact—on the marriage and on them, (2) search for meaning—trying to understand what happened and why, and (3) recovery.
- d) Resilience and Mixed-Orientation Couples
 1. Communication: When and how to talk to one another (frequently & honestly)
 2. A sense of “us” (review what drew you together at first, what keeps you together now)
 3. Staying flexible
 4. Addressing intimacy – don’t compare, differentiate *initiating, responsive, and principled* desires
- e) Conclusion – take time to work through the interpersonal trauma

Part Three: Questions for the Church

8. Whose people are we talking about?

- Christians who struggle with homosexuality are *our people*.
- They want Christian institutions to be places in which they can be more transparent about their experiences and receive more support in the context of their struggles...we need to have a better understanding of their experiences so that we can identify better ways to provide them with support.
- The traditional Christian sexual ethic does not hinge on the causes of sexual attraction or orientation...[or] on whether or not sexual orientation can change....I think by focusing so much energy and attention on these two issues, the church has actually provided little by way of instruction or guidance or pastoral care to those Christians who are sexual minorities.
- It is also important for us to be in relationships with one another in which we are able to be transparent. What often makes this difficult is the isolation sexual minorities feel because of shame...they often feel that there is something inherently wrong with them or that they would not be loved and accepted if people really knew what they were going through. But we are to walk alongside the person who experiences same-sex attraction, just as they walk alongside us in our spiritual lives.
- The church should avoid: tunnel vision, boxing in, raising the bar, preaching to the choir
- I would like to see the church say to the sincere strugglers, "Bring your light."

Take-Home Points

- Challenge yourself to see believers who are sorting out sexual identity questions as "your people," part of your community of faith.
- Recognize differences between assertive advocates and sincere strugglers—these differences will help you respond to people in both groups.
- Christian sexual minorities have the potential to grow tremendously in their spiritual lives, primarily because of what is gained in perseverance and character.

9. What is the church's response to enduring conditions?

- An enduring condition is an ongoing or enduring battle, whether it's against a disease, a temptation, an addiction, or something else. It is not something quickly or easily resolved, treated, or cured.
- Consider Terry & Linda, each having an ongoing struggle with a difference condition. Terry experiences same-sex attraction and has HIV, his wife Linda has cancer. "The gulf that separates Terry and Linda in terms of the support the church is providing is tremendous."
- We can all relate to experiencing besetting temptations in our lives, whether it's toward lust, greed, pride, or something else. Often besetting conditions are harder for us to talk about than our physical conditions.
- We are not the first people to get caught up in the cause and change debates. Remember Jesus' disciples (John 9²⁻³ "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents...?")? Jesus' response is instructive for all of us.
- To steward our sexuality is to look outside ourselves and our experiences toward a trustworthy guide. We need to look to Scripture and the work of the Spirit in order to understand our thoughts, impulses, and experiences so that we can live in conformity to God's revealed will for sexuality and its expression.^{p.184}

Principles to Practice in Relationships (with "the assertive advocate" & "the sincere struggler")

- With "the assertive advocate": *Lead by example, practice "convicted civility", listen and share, encourage them in their walk with God.*

- With “the sincere struggler”: *Solid foundation in in the Word of God, Proper perspective, Perseverance*

A Lesson in Grammar and Punctuation

- E.g. “How do I make sense of my faith in light of my sexual identity?” vs. “How do I make sense of my sexual identity in light of my faith in God’s goodness?”

Be Patient and Respect the Process

10. Concluding Thoughts

- In this chapter, Yarhouse’s approach is to “briefly summarize what we’ve learned by reminding you of the different people we’ve met along the way and the challenges that each faced.”

Two Final Words (*Humility* and *Charity*)

- *Humility* is necessary in how we approach our understanding of the causes of homosexuality. Since there are many different possible influencing factors, and no one factor appears to be the factor that determines sexual orientation, humility should move us away from placing blame on parents or focusing on simplistic explanations like the sin of “nothing-but-ism.”
- *Charity* is found in how we respond to those in our community who experience same-sex attraction. Fellow believers who are sorting this out are our people. We would do well to see them as our people, so at the very least we should always lead with charity. Charity is also found in realistic biblical hope. We can support efforts to change sexual orientation, but we can also make sure we communicate to our people that their walk with God, their spiritual maturity, their depth of character is not contingent on the degree of change of sexual orientation they experience. They can pursue a life in Christ, an identity that is central to who they are and is common with all believers. When each of us does this, we begin to taste some of our own future, some of what we are all moving toward as followers of Christ.