


Ascend

The True Freedom Trust Magazine

Summer 2024



Cultivating godly desires

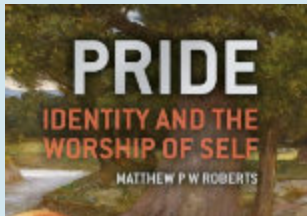


This edition of Ascend is about the nature of desire. There have been different views within the church over the centuries about the point at which an unwanted desire is designated as sinful. Simon helpfully brings clarity to this in his article, particularly within the context of sexual desire.

Within our membership, these are not just theoretical debates about theology: they have significant pastoral implications. Sarah's story is an example of this, where she explains how her church's shift in theological position on biblical sexuality ended up with them withdrawing support for her ministry because of her same-sex feelings, and ultimately with her leaving the church.

Another key area where this plays out is in the language used to describe patterns of sexual feelings. Some Christians argue that the very concept of sexual orientation is a concession to worldly thinking, whereas others see the careful use of LGBT language as being essential to bridge-building with a world that has become fearful and suspicious of the church.

By Stuart, TFT Director



Review: Pride

Page 7

Anna reviews this controversial book from Matthew Roberts. She highlights the good parts of the book but also critiques the pastoral applications.



How I describe my sexuality

Page 16

Compare and contrast 3 different view points about how to describe our sexualities.



Learning to trust in God

Page 22

Jade shares her testimony of the ups and downs of her life and how she has been learning to trust God.

God transforms our desires

Much of the narrative rhythm of the Old Testament seems to be along the lines of this: God's people receive His abundant favour; they promise their allegiance to him; but then each time their basest desires trump their love of God. This pattern recurs at Eden, Babel, the Flood, with the Golden Calf, and even in the lives of their judges and kings.

The prophet Jeremiah sums up this depressing diagnosis in his famous description of the human heart: *"The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure."* (Jeremiah 17:9). But we need to be careful about taking this Old Covenant verse as a sufficient account of the one who has put their faith in Christ. Later on, Jeremiah promises a New Covenant: *"This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people."* (Jeremiah 31:33)

So, even in the Old Testament, there is the promise of a cure for our deceitful hearts. In our own strength, our hearts are stuck in their desire for ungodly things, but nothing is impossible for God (Luke 1:37).

We are given a new self

New Testament believers are promised a new self to replace our old selves. In the context of putting on godly behaviours, Paul addresses the Christians in Colossi

as those who *"have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator."* (Colossians 3:9-10)

When we become Christians, God gives us a new self, with godly desires that don't come naturally to us. However, putting on this new self is not a passive affair – Paul uses the metaphor of getting dressed. If we are given a new outfit of clothes, they make no difference to us unless we take off our former garments and then put on the new clothes. First of all, we've got to take off our old self ("with its practices") – it's hard to give up comfy familiar old clothes, however ragged they are. And, secondly, we've then got to put on the new self. Colossians 3:12 says, *"clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience."*

You might be thinking that this just sounds a lot like behaviour modification rather than the transformation of desire. That's a valid concern – but the Bible is realistic enough about humanity not to advocate a "fake it till you make it" psychology. The key distinction is that living in a godly way isn't "faking it" once we realise who we are in Christ – we are called to live in a way that reflects the reality of our new personhood. The apostle Peter puts it like this: *"you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of*

darkness into his wonderful light.” (1 Peter 2:9)

Will God change my same-sex feelings?

So far, we’ve talked about desire in general. The verses we’ve looked at in Colossians 3 come shortly after a clear imperative to crucify ungodly desires and activities in our lives: *“Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.”* What does it mean exactly to put to death “evil desires”? For us at TFT, does this mean we should be trying to eradicate our same-sex sexual feelings?

It’s probably helpful to distinguish between two aspects of sexual desires: firstly, their orientation (or, to use biblical language, the prevailing pattern of our temptations) and, secondly, the power that they have over us.

“We should allow the Holy Spirit to renew our minds”

Our experience at TFT is that most people’s sexual orientation changes little once they’ve reached adulthood. One of the problems with conversion therapy is that it focuses on a change in orientation that most are unlikely to achieve. The Apostle Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” may have been an ongoing pattern of temptation: God’s answer to him was not to take it away, but rather to give Paul grace to endure it (2 Cor 12:7-10).

On the other hand, we have seen for many people at TFT the power that their same-sex feelings have over their lives can greatly diminish as they grow in their Christian lives. They recognise that their flesh is weak and that they need the grace of God and the accountability of His people. Unlike the foolish young man in Proverbs 7, they move away from flirting with worldly influences and cut off the paths back to sinful ways. And they acknowledge the reality of spiritual attacks, and arm themselves appropriately (Ephesians 6). The change in the power of these feelings comes both in the person no longer being a slave to them (Romans 6:6) and often in terms of a reduction in their intensity, as they become less deep-seated behaviours.

Let us return to the question: “Will God change my same-sex feelings?”. In summary, He may well leave you with them as a pattern of attraction. However, as you pursue godliness in your life, their power over your mind, body and soul should diminish over time.

Exchanging the old for the new

This transformation into a person who desires from the heart to behave in a way that pleases God doesn’t come overnight. Addressing the Ephesian church, Paul writes, *“You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires... and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”* (Ephesians 4:22,24) He

describes an ongoing rhythm of putting off the old and putting on the new. Paul goes on to give examples of ungodly behaviours that are to be replaced with godly ones. But notice that our “former way of life” in v22 is associated with the “deceitful desires”: in other words, behaviours and desires are inextricably interconnected. Speak to a former addict and he will confirm that the more he indulges his addiction, the more he feels the urge to do it: repeating the behaviour drives both the obsession (can’t stop thinking about it) and the compulsion (can’t stop doing it!).

“Learning to discern God’s gentle nudges can take time and practice”

Interestingly, the in-between verse in the Ephesians 4 quote above is verse 23: “to be made new in the attitude of your minds”. It seems that fundamental to the shift from the old behaviours and desires to the new ones is that we need to allow the Holy Spirit to be changing our thinking. The whole concept of replacing distorted thinking with true thinking, in order to improve mood and behaviours, is fundamental to Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, but the Bible has been advocating this approach for centuries before CBT came along! And, indeed, the transformation that happens within a Christian should be deeper than that within therapy, because the Holy Spirit is at work to reorient the person’s very

desires, not just their mood and behaviours.

Sometimes Christians struggle in their journey towards a transformed heart because they neglect one of these commands in Ephesians 4: we need to both be putting off the old self (Ephesians 4:22) and putting on the new self (Ephesians 4:24).

Garden your soul well

Let me change the metaphor... If we neglect putting on the new self, then it’s like a gardener carefully weeding the old bed, only to find the same old weeds returning a few weeks later. Behaviour management like this is disheartening, and eventually the person is likely to give up or become distracted – where’s the joy anyway in an empty flower bed!

If we neglect putting off the old self, then it’s like the gardener trying to plant seeds in a bed where all the energy and water is already being consumed by established weeds. Weeds mustn’t be pruned – they need to be completely dug up and thrown away! There are some excellent Christian courses out there which are helpful for helping believers to gain freedom from established sin.

As a novice gardener, I was delighted to discover the benefits of ground cover plants. Ground cover plants fill the bed with what you want, starving weeds of the space and light that they need to grow. Likewise, with sin in our lives, once the big stuff has been dealt with, displacing old sinful patterns by crowding them out

with new godly patterns is a great way to secure lasting change. As an example, if I know that I am vulnerable to looking at unhelpful websites/videos late in the evening, then finding some regular fellowship at those times with other Christians helps to crowd out those temptations and starve them of the attention that they need to succeed.

In summary, there is great hope for us as Christians in the transforming

work God wants to do in the desires of our hearts. By continuing to cooperate with the Holy Spirit to root out the old and establish the new, ungodly desires will fade and godward ones will increasingly take hold.

Stuart is the Director of TFT and the editor of Ascend magazine. As a novice gardener, he enjoys selecting new plants, but is sad that they don't always thrive under his care.





Book Review

“Pride: identity and the worship of self” by Matthew Roberts

£14.99 hardback, £7.99 Kindle, 224 pages, 2023 Christian Focus

Pride is a book that was recommended by my Crosslands tutor for helping to clarify both the meaning of ‘concupiscence’ and the current issues surrounding it. I’m studying on their seminary programme, children’s and youth ministry track. When it came time to write my essay on ‘The Image of God’, I realised this book that was sitting on my shelf might be quite helpful! Pride is a book all about identity and how this gets distorted. It’s about worship and idolatry, and how we can end up worshipping ourselves (hence the name Pride) instead of God. It also covers a lot of issues around sexual identity, which are tangled up in worship, identity and idolatry.

We are made in His image

I’d heard mixed views on its contents, so my critical goggles were on. I was surprised by how helpful it was in many ways, particularly for understanding the doctrine of the image of God and identity. This is a fundamental issue for young people, as well as to those who experience SSA. Humanity, having been made in, the image of God has been distorted in the Fall. Yet we mustn’t define ourselves by these distortions as Roberts reminds us that our true identity is in Christ (not in a trite way!). Worshipping God is part of how he designed us to flourish as humans. Roberts helped

my understanding of worship, particularly the idea of reflecting God’s glory back to Him in song and adoration. He makes it clear that the reason sin is so offensive to God is because we are made in His image and so are defiling His image when we go against His Word. He also offers the certain hope that we and all our desires will be restored through Christ, and this restoration has already begun through the powerful work of the Holy Spirit, and will be complete in eternity.

“We can end up worshipping ourselves”

Resisting temptation

My tutor was right in that it did clarify the issue of concupiscence. Concupiscence is all about the desire for sinful things, and the issue is “Is sinful desire itself sinful?” However, I’m still unsure on whether I agree with all of Roberts’ conclusions or not. Before opening this book, I had understood that facing temptation in itself can’t be sinful, because Jesus faced temptation, and yet was without sin. I also understood the biblical teaching that lust is sinful, but it’s possible to be tempted without indulging in lustful thoughts and fantasies. The whole area of desire and why it is sinful or not was the confusion that I wanted clarifying.

Despite his precision over words in most places, there are a few instances where Roberts appears to use the terms “lust” and “desire” interchangeably (p80, p103, p120, pp148-151), and as the whole concupiscence issue rests on these distinctions, it didn't help.

What did help me understand the issue better was when Roberts made it clear that there is a difference between the cause of Jesus' temptations and the cause of our temptations. He states that Jesus' temptation came from outside Himself. He was never tempted from within. Because of the Fall, we are all corrupted and the desires in our hearts that provoke temptation within us are often sinful.

Labelling

Roberts' call to not define ourselves by our desires is good, but I think that he takes this too far in certain places. He criticises Living Out for using the terms 'same-sex attracted' or 'gay' and for people treating these words as an identity marker. Although it is true that a person could adopt this language as part of a gay identity, these words are intrinsically just shared language to describe a common pattern of temptation, such as sexual temptation to those of the same sex. To do away with those terms altogether would make communication rather difficult. It would be even harder for non-Christian friends and neighbours to understand what those with same-sex attraction are struggling with.

On pp148-150, it appears as though Roberts conflates the concepts of attraction, desire and lust – this

mixing up of words feeds into his critique of Living Out and Ed Shaw in particular.

**“Take the good you can...
Filter out the unhelpful
advice”**

Pastorally sensitive

In some places, Roberts can be pastorally very helpful, such as where he wants to see young people “...learning to think of themselves as young men and women, made in God's image, and processing their emerging sexual feelings in line with those truths” (p121), rather than being taught to define themselves by their sexual feelings and so seek satisfaction and fulfilment from indulging those desires. This is fantastic advice I long for young people to heed. He also speaks positively about sexual desires stating that “sexual desires are in a way one of the most godlike attributes about us. The strength of longing for marriage and for bodily union within it speak of the strength of the love of Christ for his Church, and hers for Him” (p98).

In other places, however, his pastoral care comes across rather bluntly, thoughtlessly and even harmfully. For example, his suggestion on p105 that “...there is no reason at all why such a man [who desires homosexual encounters] may not court or marry a godly woman and, God willing, become a father.” For some who experience same-sex attraction, a godly marriage may be possible, but for many this isn't the case. In

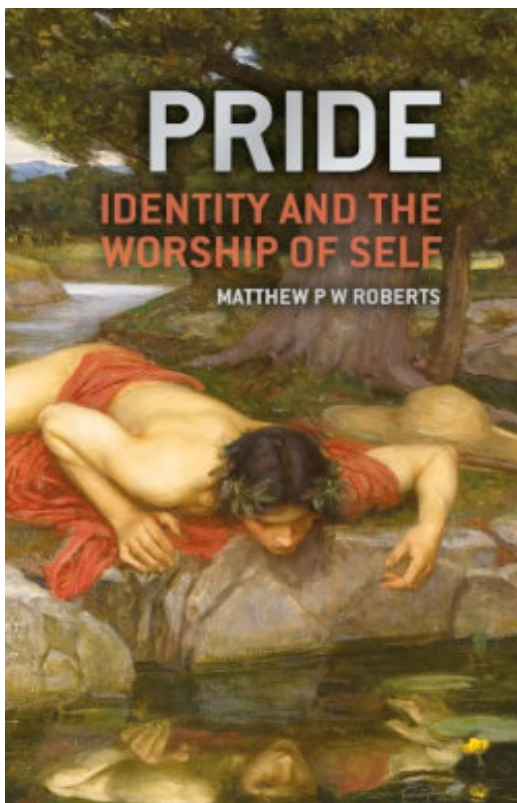
conceding, later, that there may be instances where a man is physically incapable of consummating a marriage, no thought is given to the woman and her experience of marriage to a man who has no sexual desire for her. Roberts makes his point pedantically and loses the sensitive communication needed in caring for real people.

Pastorally insensitive

His use of language in several places, whilst technically accurate, comes across as unnecessarily offensive (e.g. the terms “sodomy”, “grotesque” and “perversion”). I would certainly not recommend this approach to pastoral care either, as it is alienating and hurtful.

In summary, there is a lot we can learn from in *Pride*. Take the good you can from Roberts’ study to help you reflect God’s glory back to Him and live out your identity as one lovingly made in God’s image, and redeemed in Christ. Filter out the unhelpful advice, especially when speaking to others, and go and have a read of books and articles of those he criticises for yourself.

Anna likes to hide from her real responsibilities in life by reading and studying, and then pretending that this knowledge will help her. However, the view from her laptop currently is of the much-neglected garden, that she is longing to get back out into sometime soon!





When my pastor decided I was unfit for ministry

I recently had to leave a local church because the new pastor and I disagreed about same-sex attraction (SSA). That church was no longer helping me grow in the likeness of Christ or allowing me to follow God's call on my life for His kingdom. It was a prayer-filled, yet painful process to decide I could no longer be part of that church. So how did I get to that point and how did the pastor's perspective impact my spiritual health during that time?

Fourteen years ago, I had just moved back to my hometown and was looking for a church. Of course, no church is perfect, but this church had solid biblical preaching, spirit filled worship and great community. I got connected to a small group and started serving in the children's ministry. This church was my family and my home.

I also got involved with Celebrate Recovery at this church, a programme often associated with addiction recovery, but open to

anyone seeking help from "hurts, habits or hang-ups". I was not yet "out" in regards to same-sex attraction, but I would share generally about struggling with lust and sexual sin. There were moments of truth, conviction and repentance. And there were moments of grace, forgiveness and freedom. There was a community that supported each other in the hard things and rejoiced with each other in the victories.

My first few years at this church were some of great spiritual growth in my life. I learned a lot about walking in freedom and not giving into temptation. Still, even as I celebrated what God was doing in my life and heart to fight against lust and temptation, I felt an underlying shame knowing that when temptations did come, they were oriented towards those of my same sex.

I sometimes wonder what healing I would have known then if I had been honest about my SSA with that

community that was full of grace and truth. Instead, I spent years on my own trying to understand how it might be possible to be same-sex attracted, hold a traditional biblical view of sexuality and follow Christ. I came to better understand sin, human depravity and temptation. I was more aware daily of what it means to take up your cross and follow Christ. I was more on guard and ready to stand against temptation. I was relying more on Christ and His strength in me. I developed a richer theology of singleness and what it means for the church to be family.

“This church was my family and my home”

Eventually, I started opening up more about my experience with SSA with a few people in that church and some Christian friends not connected with that church. In general, it sparked beautiful conversations. People listened to my experiences of both struggles and freedom. They asked questions and opened up more about some of their own temptations and struggles.

We talked about their kids who were struggling or had friends struggling with sexuality. I started to see how God was using my testimony to edify and encourage other believers in their own walk with Christ. My own faith was growing, and the body of Christ was being strengthened as we talked about discipleship and community in the life of a same-sex attracted believer. Gradually the internal shame was

chipped away and replaced with holiness and joy.

Then, a couple of years ago, the church got a new pastor. I knew I needed to share with him my experience with same-sex attraction, both because it would help him as he pastored me, and because God was continuing to lead me to be more open about SSA and ministry for SSA people. From our first conversation about these things, it was evident that we weren't communicating well. Still, I did everything I could to allow him to fulfill the biblical role of pastor in my life.

One valuable thing the pastor asked me to do was write down a statement of faith to clarify what I believe about sexuality. I was happy to do this and found it helpful for my own processing and in communicating clearly with others. I sent the pastor what I wrote and invited his feedback or further questions. Not getting anything in response, I assumed he was OK with what I wrote.

Due to circumstances I won't recount here, I ended up writing a long letter to the board of elders of the church sharing my history of SSA, how God had been working in my life in recent years, what it looked like to submit to Christ and walk in holiness with SSA and my sense of calling to participate in ministry similar to the work TFT does. When I finally met in person with the whole board of elders, I felt completely grilled.

One specific question I remember was, “If you're helping someone

who experiences SSA, would you advise them to repent of their sins, follow Christ and ask God to change their heart to be heterosexual?" I answered, "I would advise them to repent of their sins, follow Christ and ask God to change their heart to be holy." I explained that I did not see heterosexuality as the goal, rather the goal was submitting to Christ no matter what direction temptation pulled.

"...it seemed like we were saying similar things just with different vocabulary"

As the conversation progressed, there were moments it seemed like we were saying similar things just with different vocabulary, but there were other times I knew we were disagreeing in some core areas. As the pastor talked, I felt like the very person who was meant to help lead me closer to Christ was instead negating the past decade of sanctification and growth that God had brought in my life and pushing me back into shame. I was frustrated and gutted.

I wanted to leave the church then, but that would have been leaving out of anger, which I knew wasn't right. A few days later, I attended a TFT women's conference. As I shared about that meeting, several TFT friends nodded in understanding. Multiple people said they had spent a long time helping their pastors learn about SSA and what a faithful life in Christ can look like with SSA. This seemed like a daunting task, but I was committed

to my church, and I left that TFT weekend ready to continue working things through with the pastor.

Over the next several months I continued sharing with the pastor things that God was doing in my life and options I was considering for the future. Finally, he made a definitive statement of his position saying, "Based on my understanding of your theology, we will not be recommending you for any further education or ministry." There it was - what we had been tiptoeing around for months was finally stated outright. Because I was not actively repenting of SSA itself, he found me unfit for ministry.

That was the moment I knew I had to leave. I know the pastor was upholding his own convictions of what he believed the Bible says, but I could not sit under a pastor who saw me as an unrepentant sinner for the very thing that God had used most in my life to teach me about following Him. I had explained to the pastor that if same-sex desire is expressed as a longing, craving or lustful thought, I would unequivocally call it sin and find it needing repentance. But not every temptation grows into sin. The capacity I have to experience temptation towards those of my sex is not itself sinful.

"We all need pastors who will help us stay oriented to Christ"

I often use an analogy from a 1000-mile bicycle trip that I took one

summer. One morning as I got on my bike and started actively pedaling in the direction of my goal, I said aloud, “I don’t want to do this.” No one was making me take that trip. I could have turned around and gone home at any moment. In a way, I expressed a desire to quit, but that potential was never something I saw as an actual option. My mind and heart were fully set on my goal. I never wavered in pursuing the thoughts and actions that would keep me moving in the right direction. Every analogy breaks down eventually, but here’s my point concerning my response to temptation: I can either allow my mind and heart to dwell there, which would lead to sin, or I can take every thought captive (2 Corinthians 10:5) and keep my mind and heart fully turned towards Christ.

We all need pastors who will help us stay oriented to Christ no matter what temptations come our way. We need brothers and sisters in Christ with whom we can share both struggles and joys. We need conviction of the Holy Spirit that will lead us to repentance when we have sinned. May our churches be places that help us grow in Christ and through which we are encouraged and equipped to engage the world for His kingdom.

Sarah has been a member of TFT for 3.5 years. She loves talking to people about Jesus and travelling is one of her favourite pastimes.



Unfit for ministry podcast

In this extended conversation, Sarah and Ruth talk about their experience of church and consider in more depth the arguments around concupiscence.

To listen to the podcast, you can subscribe to “Ascend Higher” on the major podcasting platforms. Alternatively, listen directly from the TFT website using the link below:

truefreedomtrust.co.uk/podcasts



Book Review

“Does the Bible support Same-sex Marriage?
21 Conversations from a Historically Christian View”
By Preston Sprinkle
£12.65 Paperback, 240 pages, 2023, David C Cook

Three years ago, I reviewed Preston Sprinkle’s book *Embodied: Transgender Identities, the Church, and What the Bible Has to Say*. At that time, I wrote, “Sprinkle has a rare capacity as an author: on the one hand, to manage to be emotionally warm, personable, people-orientated, empathic and real; and on the other, scientifically rigorous, clear and theologically coherent.”

I am pleased to report that Sprinkle succeeds in this book too, published in 2023, to be all of the above. He analyses the arguments for same-sex marriage, concluding that same-sex sexual relationships are prohibited from the Bible. As someone who has wrestled with these arguments for decades, I could not honestly think of anything he does not raise - and then deal with in an honest, clear and well analysed style. It is a particular highlight how he gives those he disagrees with a full, thoughtful and compassionate hearing. It is particularly honest and heartening to hear him speak of wrestling himself with arguments for same-sex marriage, nearly being convinced by some.

Sprinkle’s approach is not only generous to his opponents, but also generous in the number of arguments he considers. There are 21 of them and many cover related areas. He is clear in stating he writes

for a variety of groups, and this shows in his inclusion of a number of different points of view. It is helpful that he has spent time thinking over these views with his opponents and has succeeded in remaining friends with them. He is clear that we should listen well and be willing to change our views in general. If we don’t, how can we expect others to?

“...he gives those he disagrees with a full, thoughtful and compassionate hearing”

He begins by suggesting how we are to conduct any contentious conversation. The author takes very much a collaborative approach - rather than go in with all guns blazing or being defensive towards any counter-argument, he might say, “That’s a good point” in the spirit of mutual curiosity. He considers the biases we all bring in debate and how we tend to hear what we fear and to counter it quickly with what we are comfortable with. He therefore emphasises that people will often remember how we have behaved, rather than exactly what we have said.

He then goes on to outline the biblical case for different-sex marriage and against same-sex marriage. It's interesting to read his perspective, as an author who is not same-sex attracted. I suspect that he can have a greater degree of objectivity, but he avoids the trap of sounding judgmental, no doubt being helped by the variety of friendships he has. His arguments for different-sex marriage take the following perspectives: sex difference is an intrinsic part of what marriage is; same-sex sexual relationships are always prohibited in the Bible; the multi-ethnic global Church affirms the historically Christian view; marriage and sex are not essential to human flourishing and, marriage has a purpose.

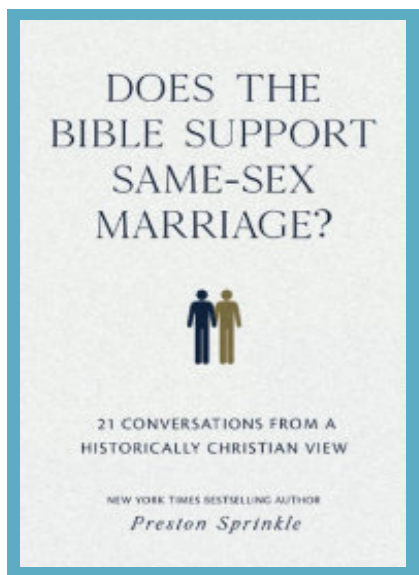
The remaining chapters can be treated a bit like a buffet: you can dip into them as you please. I think that Sprinkle's explanations are clear and humane, but inevitably there are discussions about Greek words, Greco-Roman culture and some more nuanced theological approaches. These discussions are undertaken, though, to take on some of the more complex arguments rooted in culture and the Bible. Some of the arguments that he challenges include "Paul is not talking about consensual same-sex relationships", "Romans 1 condemns excessive lust, not same-sex love" and "Romans 1:26 is not referring to female same-sex sexual relationships."

Each chapter includes points of agreement in the debate, which I found helpful to bridge some gaps in understanding. There are some of the "old" recent arguments: Paul is

patriarchal and homophobic (how ignorant in contrast to us post-moderns), Jesus never mentioned homosexuality (but nor did he mention nuclear submarines, so they must be OK then?!), God's acceptance of LGBTQ people should mirror that of the Gentiles, "Love is Love" (but adulterous can say that too). (The bracketed comments are my own).

One of the particularly compelling lines of Sprinkle's argument is his repeated returning to Jesus' words of a man leaving his father and mother and the two becoming one flesh. (Matthew 19, quoting Genesis 2). It is foundational and an antidote for many of the arguments which may assail us. I could say more, but I suggest you read (or listen to Sprinkle read) the book!

Gary who is a doctor, lives in Central London with his ever-patient wife and two children. He has been a member of TFT since before some of you readers were born! He is enjoying semi-retirement and going on holiday.





What I call myself and why

We recognise within TFT that there is a range of opinion on how people describe their sexual feelings and why. In the following three opinion pieces, David, Russ and Christine each explain the language that they prefer, along with their reasoning. At TFT, we don't have an official "line" on the best vocabulary to use to describe a prevailing pattern of sexual feelings towards those of the same-sex. Whatever terms you choose to adopt, we would encourage you to respect that others will have settled on alternative preferred language for themselves, often for good reasons. It is good to be generous when using terminology. Firstly, we can act generously when we listen: let's try hard to understand what others are really saying when they say "gay Christian" or "unwanted same-sex attractions" or "homosexual desires". Secondly, we can be generous in our speaking: let's at least consider using words around sexuality that make sense to our audience.

David

Let me sketch five reasons why I describe myself as a "celibate gay Christian":

1. Scriptural authority
The first is scriptural authority. While Scripture is clear that homosexual acts are sinful, it also maintains that

Russ

If I need to distinguish myself by my prevailing sexual feelings, then I will describe myself as a "same-sex attracted Christian", and I think this is similar to how many members of TFT would describe themselves when needing to say something about their sexuality. If I can take

Christine

The Bible does not talk about homosexuality as an orientation. It does talk about homosexual acts as a prohibition. In Jewish understanding of human nature, there are yetzer hara (evil inclination) and yetzer hatov (good inclination). Yetzer hara is the inclination to do evil, by violating the will of God.

Christians live in tension between the fallen nature, that is at war with God, and the new self, which desires to love and obey God. All Christians are being made holy. We aren't yet perfect. We still experience the attractions of our old self. Yet because of Christ, we can live in victory. God does not wave a magic wand to remove our desires, at least that is not the normative experience. It is equally wrong to endorse or to deny the presence of

fallen desires, and that is why I call myself a “gay” or “same-sex-attracted” celibate Christian.

Celibate gay christian

2. Theological accuracy
My second reason is theological accuracy. To be attracted to the same sex is not a voluntary

the time to be a bit more precise, I might say that I'm a “Christian who struggles with unwanted same-sex attractions”, since this more clearly shows that the same-sex feelings are not something that I'm celebrating or in any way building my identity upon. I think there's always a balance with language between being precise (but clunky) and using colloquial language (but open to misinterpretation).

Let me make a few things clear around what I mean (and don't

mean) by using my preferred phrasing:

1. Describing myself as “same-sex attracted” simply describes what has been a significant battle in my Christian life. It doesn't represent a concession to worldly identity. In contrast, I believe that it glorifies God in helping me to remember that he has brought me a growing freedom from indulging these feelings. I might in other contexts describe myself as a

Homosexual desires are classed as yetzer hara (evil desires).¹

Before God decided to send the Flood,

“The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.”
(Genesis 6:5)

Clearly, God does not delight in our evil desires. Evil desires precede evil deeds. Jesus, like many rabbis of His day, built fences around the Torah

(God's instruction). In Matthew 5:27-28, on the commandment “Do not commit adultery”, Jesus taught “don't lust in your heart”. “The logic is: if one would not lust in thought, surely one would not sin with one's body.”²

I believe homosexual desires are the result of the Fall. I do not know if the cause is genetic or environmental or both. It breaks my heart to know that my unwanted homosexual desires are evil in God's eyes. But it also makes me grateful to Jesus for redeeming me by His

Endnotes: 1 Rapoport, C., Sacks, J. and Berkovits, D. (2004) Judaism and homosexuality: An authentic orthodox view. London: Vallentine Mitchell.

² “Like a physical fence, a fence built around the Torah is a protective enclosure around God's commandment; an extra layer of rules. In theory, one would first have to break the “fence” and only then fall into a transgression of the actual commandment of God.”

behaviour, as many have incorrectly argued. Instead it is a result of the creation-wide effects of sin.

Whereas "stealing Christian" describes a believer who actively steals as an acted behavior, "gay Christian" may simply refer to one's orientation and nothing more.

This is why I rarely, if ever, use the phrase "gay Christian" without adding the adjective "celibate",

meaning committed to a life of chasteness in Christ.

3. Be prophetic

My third reason is to be prophetic. Those of us who are orthodox or traditional Christians and who are gay or SSA need to reclaim our space in the conversation over sexuality back from the secular culture.

The opposite of homosexuality is

"Western Christian" or a "male Christian", but those descriptors don't have to be identities that are competing with my primary allegiance: above all, I am "in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

2. In regular conversation, I will just talk about myself as a "Christian": the "same-sex attracted" part would only be added where it helps others to

understand that I have different experiences from most people concerning my sexual temptations.



Same-Sex
attracted
christian

sacrificial death. That is why I prefer to call Jesus by His Hebrew name, יֵשׁוּעַ Yeshua, which means 'salvation'.

My celibacy is not a sacrifice. It is an act of obedience to the will of God. I choose celibacy because I choose LIFE (Deut. 30:15-20). Yeshua said one cannot enter the kingdom of heaven if one practise lawlessness (Matthew 7:21-23). Yeshua also said "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." (John 14:15). God is unchanging (Malachi 3:6, Hebrews 13:8). What offends God in Leviticus' moral code still offends Him today.

What is my reward? My reward is in the world-to-come as well as in the here-and-now. God Himself is my reward. When Abraham was sojourning in Canaan, childless, a stranger in a strange land, the LORD said to Abraham "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield, your very great reward." (Genesis 15:1)

It seems that the more I hate sexual immorality, and the more I seek to live my life to please God, the less I want to identify myself as a "gay Christian". If I have to speak with a pastor about my SSA, I would

not heterosexuality. It is holiness. We need to stand for a different way to live in the gay community, and welcome others from that community into the church to receive Jesus' love.

4. Identity

The fourth reason is related to identity. My identity is first and foremost in Christ, but those other words “gay” and “celibate” tell the redemptive story of God's grace in

There are a few reasons that I don't tend to describe myself as a “gay Christian”:

1. The word “gay” in our culture increasingly refers to sexual orientation alone, but many people hearing it would understand it to mean an unreserved embrace of living as a gay person. I think that “celibate gay Christian” is a

introduce myself as a “Christian with same-sex attraction”. I avoid, as much as possible, identifying myself as a “gay Christian”. For me, the word “gay” is a symbol of our culture's celebration of sin and rebellion against God's ways and commandments.



Christian

The decriminalisation of homosexual sex and the growing

my life.

When I chose to be celibate, I placed the word “gay” under the lordship of Christ; it is no longer a competitive identity to Christ, but a beautiful reminder of my submission to his lordship over my whole life, including my sexuality.

5. Reconciliation

My fifth reason is reconciliatory.

Some of us have sinfully failed to

much clearer phrase. However, as a man married to a woman, I am not celibate and therefore can't use this fuller phrase. I suppose I could probably refer to myself as a “chaste gay Christian” (meaning that I refrain from sexual activity outside of my marriage vows). But a key benefit of using the word “gay” is to be able to enter into common parlance, whereas

social approval of same-sex relationships have made it “safer” for homosexuals to identify themselves as “gay”. Christians are not immune to this kind of thinking. The “gay Christian” identity is enticing to embrace because our culture not only legitimises homosexuality, it also glamourizes it. But Yeshua said that we are not of the world just as He is not of the world (John 17:14-16). His words alone should prompt us to question our “gay Christian” identity.

reach out to, value, and love the gay community but are very happy to moralize and judge. Mainstream secular culture feels alienated by terms like “same-sex-attracted” and “gay lifestyle”. The term “same-sex attracted” sounds medical, like a diagnosis reminiscent of when same-sex desire was seen as a disease. When I entered the church and heard these terms, they kept me from feeling included and understood. On the other hand, the

term “gay” is positive and welcoming.

Like God, who became human in Christ and reached out across our human experience, we must learn to love others, made in the image of God, by identifying and entering into their experience and removing boundaries.

the idea of chastity is (sadly) laughably old-fashioned to modern ears!

2. Part of my reluctance to use the word “gay” about myself is probably generational. As someone now entering my 50s, my experience of the word “gay” growing up was that it was a term of abuse leading to shame. However, for modern young people it is simply a label. For me, describing myself as “gay” does not sit right, but I respect

the freedom of others to use the word, especially if they can use it in a way where it’s not a stumbling block to others.

One friend who is not a member of TFT once told me that reading about “SSA” in Ascend magazine made it sound like the person had a psychiatric condition like “PTSD” or “BPD”. Therefore, I try now where possible to spell it out as “same-sex attraction” or “same-sex feelings”, even though “SSA” is a convenient abbreviation within TFT circles.

God’s glory departs from us when our worship of Him is mixed with idolatry (Ezekiel 10), when our identity is “leavened” with a little “gay pride” (1 Corinthians 5:6-8).

So, I repented. I removed the “gay” leaven from my identity. Today, I am just a “Christian”, not a “gay Christian”.

I am blessed to walk not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stand in the way of sinners (Psalm 1:1). Reaching gay people with the

Gospel doesn’t require identifying with sin. Friendship with the world means enmity against God (James 4:4). I don’t want to rely on human logic to reach the lost. Not by our might nor by our power but by the Holy Spirit will sinners repent and accept Messiah (Zechariah 4:6).

My “Side A” friends often ask me to pray for their difficult situation. They say to me, “I know God is with you”. They believe in the power of my prayers, but not in theirs. I hope one day they will see God’s glory in

David is originally from Sydney, Australia, and is the author of the book 'A War of Loves'. He now works in Oxford, and loves all the dressing up he gets to do as part of the university there.

[this extract from the book 'A war of loves' is used with permission from Zondervan publishing.](#)

Russ is a board-games enthusiast, but worries that he is losing his edge with all the complicated new games available. He will always be very content at a Scrabble board, but may never come to terms with the collaborative version of Scrabble.

me and begin to walk in holiness!

Christine, was saved from a young age, to go on a deep and life-changing journey of understanding Him and His redemption project from the perspective of Messianic Jewish believers. After working in the I.T. industry for 30+ years, Christine retired in 2021. She occupies herself with Torah studies and sharing the Jewish roots of the Christian faith with Gentile believers. She enjoys gardening and sometimes volunteers at the Kew Gardens.



Please note that the view points included here do not necessarily represent the position of TFT.



Learning to trust in God

As an only child, I grew up in a small village called Livingston, just outside Edinburgh, with my mum and dad. It wasn't a Christian home or with any Christian family members. Religion or God was never spoken about unless in the form of blasphemy. Family life was very complicated growing up. My dad was an alcoholic, so he wasn't really around much. I remember the many times he would come home drunk and start shouting abuse, setting fire alarms off early in the morning, windows being smashed and the police coming regularly to our door. Safe to say, I missed out on that fatherly love and relationship.

My wider family was just as messy. My aunts would bully me and call me names, I was regularly excluded and forced to sit out of family situations and also sexually exploited by my uncle. On reflection, I've always felt a sense of not belonging and abandonment from a young age.

Identity struggle

I had some good friends and occasionally went to Sunday school. My mum always thought I was going for the free sweets, but actually I liked to listen to the Bible stories and having something to do. However, that's all they were - stories. I never understood the gospel or got to know Jesus and, as life got busier and I got older, I stopped going. Throughout high school, I was badly bullied and, subsequently, at the age of 15, my parents suddenly separated and divorced. Not having a platform to talk about this, I harboured my feelings, failed my exams, dropped out of school at 16 and went to dance college.

This is where I started to struggle with my identity. I was continually body shamed by my dance teacher and forced to dye my hair certain colours and wear certain clothes to fit specific moulds. I was given a toothbrush and told to make myself sick in order to help me lose weight. It was during this time my dance teacher repeatedly told me I was a lesbian, I was too butch to be straight and that's why I had never

had a boyfriend. All of this led me to question my sexuality and identity. Who was I? Was I gay? Where did I fit in? I didn't know how to navigate everything and just felt even more disorientated.

At the age of 20, a virgin and still a confused and vulnerable young girl, I was drugged and forced to engage in sexual intercourse. This trauma, alongside previous childhood events, had a huge impact on my ability to create relationships, especially with men. I couldn't trust anyone and so I built many protective walls and kept others at arm's length.

“Who was I? Was I gay? Where did I fit in?”

Same-sex marriage

I needed to escape. In 2012, I ran down to London to study children's nursing. Whilst I was there I met a girl. What started out as a close friendship very quickly developed into a same-sex relationship and I began to officially identify with the LGBTQ+ community. I'd slept with both male and females before, but this was my first proper relationship and she was the first person to show me this deeper sense of love that I was so clearly craving. I felt like I belonged with her. She saw me and heard me. We were happy. 5 years later, I proposed, and in 2017 we got married.

However, throughout the last 2 years of our relationship, I'd begun to have doubts. Although I

absolutely loved being with her, and everything about her made me smile and laugh, I didn't want to engage in any intimacy or have sex. There was a disconnection. This deeper friendship or soul mate relationship was enough for me, but it wasn't for her. She wanted more. I knew something was wrong, that this wasn't how a marriage was supposed to look like. The more I hid how I was feeling, the stronger these doubts and feelings got.

I needed something to replace these doubts, something to make them stop. So, we started our IVF journey with me as the carrier. Although I always wanted children of my own, I thought this would be a positive step to distract me from the doubts and give us something else to focus on. We picked our donor sperm and spent thousands of pounds in the process of trying to conceive. We had 2 failed attempts and on the 3rd attempt I had a miscarriage. This experience - the injecting of various hormones, the invasive procedures and examinations, the hope, the loss and grief - made me eventually snap. I found myself spiralling into a very dark and lonely place. I began to suffer from panic attacks and poor mental health. I started to self-harm and became suicidal.

I was at rock bottom. Overwhelmed with guilt and desperate for help, I needed saving, but I didn't know how. Although I didn't know anything about Him other than His existence, it was my last and final attempt at any form of hope. My thoughts turned to God.

Becoming a Christian

I had a friend at work who I knew was a Christian and we started talking about God and I ended up going to her church. As I went along each week, things started to make sense. I began to understand what it meant to be a Christian and I began to feel this deeper sense of peace whenever I was there.

The night that things really clicked was after a specific sermon on God's forgiveness. After listening, I said to my friend "I don't feel worthy enough to be forgiven, I don't understand how or why God could ever forgive or love me." She turned around and explained that what I was describing was the concept of grace, how this grace demonstrated God's love for us and why we needed Jesus to receive it. At that moment, I understood the gospel. That night I repented and asked God for forgiveness of my sins.

“He has me tightly in His grip and continues to teach me dependency”

Becoming a Christian, and coming to know Jesus, gave me the strength and courage to do the right thing. God spoke to me and battled with me through 2 specific verses:

“Then he said to the crowd, “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross daily, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it.” Luke 9:23 -24 NLT

“So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” 2 Corinthians 4:18 NIV

Decision making for Christ

Five weeks later I ended my marriage. I was left with nothing. Literally homeless, I lost my home, money, belongings, our friends, a family, a future, my identity, my reputation and my best friend. But when I thought my life was ending, it was only just beginning.

Since coming to faith, God has opened my eyes and has brought me new life, a life full of hope and freedom, and a whole new family. He's taught me that I'm not perfect now nor will I ever be, yet His love will always remain. Regardless of my past or future sins, through His son Jesus Christ and through His glorious grace, I am forgiven and loved. With my being rooted deeply in Him, He will never abandon me.

I received biblical counselling very early on in my faith and it was here that I came to know about Living Out. It was during lockdown I attended an online event with them and it was through this event that I came to know about TFT. Feeling isolated at my church and still not really knowing anybody, I joined TFT and instantly felt understood and safe to share my vulnerability and struggles. Since then I have attended women's events and conferences and through God's provision and the work of the Holy Spirit, these ladies have walked alongside me through many battles.

My Christian walk has not been easy and I've been faced with many

moral dilemmas that have tested my faith. Having frozen embryos in storage, I had to make the decision of using them or disposing of them. As they are embryos and considered life, based on my own morals and from a biblical perspective, I did not feel it ethically right to kill those embryos. I felt that this was not a decision I could make based on my own understanding. This was something I needed to leave in God's hands and sovereignty.

Having spoken with biblical counsellors and friends, I decided to give the first embryo a try at life. If God wanted this child and that was His plan, I would be at peace with that, and if God decided that was not the plan, then I could at least say that this was God's plan for them. In doing this, the Lord has blessed me with a beautiful little boy. I still have many more ethical decisions to make, having 2 more embryos still in storage. I need to continue trusting in God's character and timing and plan for my life as well as theirs.

Trusting God

Although the best decision I have ever made, I think it important to say that becoming a Christian has not provided some magical cure to my troubles of today. I continue to struggle with SSA, poor mental health, anxiety and panic attacks and, currently, with an eating disorder. Letting go of control and

wholly submitting to Him is hard and my previous trauma has played a huge part in me learning fully to trust in Him. This is also a process and one that I am absolutely committed to and continuing to grow in. I know that God is with me through this. There have been times when I've really tried to walk away from this Christian life, but no matter how hard I've tried to run, the Holy Spirit keeps bringing me back:

*"Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence? If I
go up to the heavens, you are there; if I
make my bed in the depths, you are
there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea, even
there your hand will guide me, your
right hand will hold me fast."
Psalm 139:7 - 10 NIV*

I have nowhere else to run. He has me tightly in His grip and continues to teach me dependency. If God is for us, who can be against us?! Jesus is my only hope. My only rock and certainty. He saved my life and in Him I choose to stay.

Jade works in the field of social care and loves creating meaningful relationships. She has performed dance around the world including the Commonwealth Games in India and Disneyland Paris. She enjoys going out for coffee, having a good pastry and watching the world go by - her bank account begs to differ.



Do you need to repent?

Each spring, the TFT staff team sits down to take stock of all that has happened over the last twelve months, and prepare our annual report for the Charity Commission. It's a great opportunity to reflect on where we've seen God moving over the last year, and discern what plans He might have for TFT in the months and years ahead. As I look back and think about the evolving challenges of our speaking ministry, many of our engagements in 2023 saw us being asked the same questions: "Aren't your same-sex desires sinful? Don't you need to repent?" How would you answer that first question? You might find yourself instinctively reaching for either a 'yes' or 'no' answer. But this question actually relates to a doctrinal debate that has been taking place in the church for centuries. Because of this, it's worth us being aware of some of that history so that we can give a fuller response. Let me (attempt to) explain.

Original Sin

Concupiscence is the doctrinal term used to describe the disordered desires all humans experience for things that God has forbidden. In modern times, the term has often been used to talk about illicit sexual desire but, over the centuries, the term has also been used to refer to other sinful desires such as envy, malice, or greed. Our word concupiscence comes from the Latin word *concupiscentia*, and is most often associated with Augustine of Hippo, a North African Bishop who lived in the fourth and fifth centuries. Augustine is easily one of the most important Christian thinkers of his period, and has had huge influence over Christianity in the Western world. For him, concupiscence was linked to his doctrine of Original Sin.

Augustine found himself the opponent of another theologian named Pelagius, who taught that humans are untainted, and able to follow God's law of their own volition. Augustine's fear was that saying humans have this ability to

please God within themselves diminishes the need for God's grace toward us. His response was to say that humans not only have an inner proclivity towards sin but are sinful in their very nature. This sinful nature is something that is inherited by/imputed to (there's some debate about the mechanics) all descendants of the first humans, owing to the sin of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. The effects that we experience because of Adam's fall are what the term 'original sin' refers to.

“We repent of sin and we seek to obey”

Original sin is commonly thought to comprise two aspects. The first is guilt. This pertains to both our legal status before God (as wrongdoers), and our deservedness of punishment or wrath. Again, there's a lot of debate, even among evangelical theologians, as to whether or not we are counted guilty purely because of Adam's sin. It is definitely not TFT's place to make a ruling on that, and there are likely to be different views held within TFT's membership. The second aspect is corruption. It is this aspect that refers to the pollution of our souls that gives rise to our inclination towards sin and our desires for those things that God forbids.

Types of Desire

How then are we to understand desire? Scripture broadly speaks of two types. One is seen in the Greek word *thelo* (*hafetz* in Hebrew). This

word usually carries a sense of the things we find delight in / the things we find pleasing. The second type is often expressed using the Greek word *epithumia* (*hamad/avah* in Hebrew). These words are often translated as *covet/desire*. What's interesting about this second (*epithumia*) group of words, is that scripture speaks of them both positively and negatively dependent on the context and target. They may be ordered towards godliness or towards sin.

James 1:13-15 is a passage I've been asked about at speaking engagements several times, as it deals with the relationship between desire and sin. The passage might seem to suggest that experiencing temptation inevitably leads to sin. Those asking about this passage usually point to same-sex sexual behaviour being contrary to God's created order (while opposite-sex sexual behaviour can be directed towards God's purposes). If then, our desire for sexual intimacy with someone of the same-sex can only ever be contrary to created order, and experiencing those temptations inevitably leads towards sin, why don't we pursue a change in our sexual orientation?

Here, it's helpful to square this passage with 1 Corinthians 10:13, which reveals that temptation is resistible. James speaks of temptation as the consummation of our own fallen desires being lured and enticed. You might express it as a formula. Temptation = Desire + Enticement. In this age, the effects of original sin ensure I am unable to rid myself of fallen desires completely. But, mercifully, an age

is coming where Jesus will heal them, and I won't experience fallen desire at all. Changing my same-sex sexual orientation to an opposite-sex one won't change the fact that I have fallen desires. What I can do something about, in this age, is I can resist enticement in order to resist temptation. I can resist giving temptation what it needs in order to eventually give birth to sin.

Pastorally, it's important we avoid falling into a trap where we only ever speak of opposite-sex desire as being benign, while only ever speak of same-sex desires as being sinful. The human experience of desire is far more complicated than that. Even a husband's sexual desire for his wife could be sinful if the sexual thing he wants to do degrades her or causes her harm as a person fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God. Likewise, not all the desires arising from a person finding delight in someone of the same-sex may lead toward sin. Enjoying a deeper level of emotional intimacy and fellowship with a person of the same-sex can be a wonderful thing.

Demystifying the debate

So, with the historical and Biblical background covered, what then of the two questions our speaking engagement audience member was asking in my introductory paragraph? Here is my attempt at nuanced answers:

Isn't experiencing same-sex attraction sinful? Well, that depends on what you mean by sinful. I can definitely affirm that God did not give me these same-sex desires, but I didn't choose them either. I think

the Bible is really clear that the desires we all experience for things that God forbids are a result of a fallen human nature because of the sin of Adam and Eve. So, I might be comfortable with you saying they are 'of sin' in the sense that I believe I have them because of original sin. The problem with the word sinful is that I think most people in our churches only think of 'actual sin' when they hear that word. This means they're thinking about some kind of sinful action. My desires could definitely lead to me actually sinning, but I'm not actually sinning in my ongoing involuntary experience of them, so long as I'm resisting temptation and directing myself toward godliness.

**“We may grow tired, but
He doesn't”**

Don't you need to repent of your desires? I want to do anything that is in my power in order to love and serve the Lord as I believe I should in the light of what I read in scripture. The question is, how do I do that? It is a fact of the time in which we live (before Jesus comes again) that everyone has a fallen human nature, and that fallen nature causes us all to desire things that God doesn't want for us. I can't change that reality, though I have assurance that Jesus has and will change it. And the emphasis of scripture doesn't seem to be one of swapping the sexual desires we have for different ones, it seems to be resisting the ones that don't correspond to God's purposes. So, I can take wise steps in order to resist

being tempted by the set of desires that I have. I can also exercise a degree of lament over the fallen state of God's world. And I often do in moments where resisting my desires in order to follow Christ feels particularly costly. But doing that should never lead to feeling personal shame. We must always have both the present day and the day of Christ's return in view - lamenting the state of the world in this age can't be divorced from the joy found in Jesus breaking through into it.

I'm always grateful for those we meet at our speaking engagements who put the time and effort into wrestling with this subject, so that our churches communicate biblical

truth in a loving and compassionate way. As always, whenever we're speaking about topics as sensitive as this one, there's a need for real care and precision to be taken in our use of language. We need to be clear about what we mean and what we don't mean. Recent church discussions about concupiscence ought to remind all people of their need for Christ, for it is only in Him that all evil desires will be conquered. Praise God that, in Christ, he has broken into this age and is leading us to a greater one.

Simon is TFT's Teaching & Outreach Manager. His ability to find online shopping discount codes is unparalleled in his friend group.

Support our media projects

Could you support our various media projects? Through these projects, we hope to produce videos that can be used for the promotion of TFT. These videos highlight the various aspects of the TFT ministry and the work we do. Along with other resources (such as Ascend), these various resources help to inform and encourage people who watch or read them. If you would like to donate, please visit the link below or call 0151 653 0773.

truefreedomtrust.co.uk/donate





Pleasing God - Women's conference review

I found the ministry of TFT in October 2023, while searching online. I had suppressed my same-sex feelings for over 50 years, never having spoken to anyone about them and decided to attend the Women's Conference in London in February.

God is so good. I do not live in England, so had to make travel arrangements to get to London. The week before the Women's Conference, I was at a Christian retreat in the UK, so was able to amalgamate both events. This was such a blessing. I headed to London on the Friday evening and joined many of the women for a nice meal before heading to the conference on the Saturday in the city.

The venue was stunning and really complemented the event.

If I'm being honest, I felt a little anxious going to the event, as it was the first time acknowledging and accepting my same-sex feelings; in a way, I felt like I was "coming out" to myself and to a group of women

who I did not know, but who understood me. That was so powerful.

Everyone seemed so friendly and made me feel very welcome. I do feel that going for the meal the night before was extremely helpful and made Saturday not as daunting, as I made some new connections at the meal.

"...I had found a tribe of women who could empathise and support each other"

The day started with wonderful worship from Catherine and Nat and the presence of the Holy Spirit was really felt. The guest speaker, Jane, led some thought-provoking sessions and we all had to answer some prepared questions on what we had listened to, which got everyone involved, engaged and invested. The talks from Jane were centred around holiness in

2 Corinthians 6: 1-7:1 and 2 Corinthians 5: 1-10. We all aim to please God as Christians; as much as temptations and life affects us, we must keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the cross and eternity.

After lunch we split into groups for a discussion session, which was so good, as it gave us opportunities to talk and listen to others' opinions on living in this world as women who struggle with sexuality. We could get to know each other a little more in smaller groups. This was followed by a Q&A session, where everyone was encouraged to ask any questions they had on their heart.

The afternoon finished with more wonderful worship and then a group of women went to the local pub to chat and connect, which I attended for a little while before heading to the airport to fly home.



I reflected on the last 24 hours on my journey home and I was so pleased that I had stepped out of my comfort zone and gone to the conference. I felt as if I had found a tribe of women who could empathise and support each other on this journey, which to me is such a blessing for now and the future. I would recommend to anyone who has not been to an event to go. I felt quite emotional and shed a few tears at times throughout the day, as the Holy Spirit worked in me. The whole day was a wonderful blend of worship, prayer, teaching, discussion and fellowship.

Something that really spoke to me at this conference was the importance of having a prayer partner, someone you can honestly admit your sins to and hold each other accountable. I am seeking someone now.

Tracey is a divorced mum of two grown up children, a chaplain who loves to travel and spend time with Jesus and her friends.



God's grace was sufficient for me

TFT: What it was like for you growing up, Malcolm?

Malcolm: I grew up with I suppose I'd say a normal family. I had good parents. I had a stepmother because when I was born my mum died in childbirth. And then, a year later, my dad got married to the person I knew as "Mum" - she was a lovely person - really kind. I was always a bit insecure and I can remember as a young child looking for something that wasn't there; that could be me knowing that my real mum wasn't there. Moving areas might have brought in some insecurities in my life too. But I had a caring family.

TFT: And were you brought up as a Christian?

Malcolm: Our parents were church-goers. We went to Sunday school and then, when I was about 13, my parents became Christians and then we were much more involved with church. As a teenager, I gave my heart to the Lord at the age of 13. But that was also about the time I

realised that I was attracted to my own sex, unlike my friends who were really into girls. This was something that set me apart because, unlike these days, it wasn't talked about at all. You know, except in a derogatory way. I kept my sexuality to myself.

TFT: So how did that leave you feeling, having those attractions?

Malcolm: I was confused. I met a Pentecostal church minister, who was starting up a church in Ramsgate and we became friends. I trusted him and possibly some of my attachment feelings was towards him. One day I sat down and told him about my homosexual feelings and he was very understanding and friendly and he said that he'd help me. But, unfortunately, he had other ideas. One Saturday night we went London and he organised accommodation. During the night he started touching me. The next day I felt terribly guilty, but he just brushed it off. And then, as time went on, it carried on. I didn't seem

to be able to stop it: I'm not sure if I wanted to stop it.

TFT: That must have added to your feelings of confusion. Someone who was supposed to be helping you was taking advantage of you.

Malcolm: It did. And after that four months we went to stay in a flat with his parents and they were away once. Things went a bit further than they had before. The next day he just turned on me and said he didn't want anything to do with me. He left me in limbo. I couldn't tell my parents. I remember I was quite unwell and was having panic attacks and I just felt rejected.

“I am loved and cared for by God”

TFT: So the whole thing affected your mental health quite badly?

Malcolm: Yes. I started going to an Anglican church and there was a good youth leader there. He and his wife became really good friends with me. They gave me some stability and the church helped me through my 20s. When I was about 27 I met my wife. I did tell her about what had happened. She thought my sexuality could change. She had had a bad upbringing and a lot of rejection and maybe we saw something in each other. We had three children, but the marriage was quite stormy. We stayed together for 32 years.

We would move churches because of

her rejection problem. We stopped going to church completely for the last 10 or 15 years of our marriage. Part of me felt that I'd let her down though, because sex wasn't always easy.

TFT: That must have been really difficult

Malcolm: When I was 55, I had to take early retirement because I nearly died of a ruptured aneurysm. I had several operations. We lost our home and had to go into rented accommodation.

My wife and I and our youngest son moved in with my eldest son. He was suddenly taken very ill. By the time we got into the hospital, he was paralysed from the shoulders down. My wife wanted him to move hospitals for her convenience, without their permission. I told the hospital authorities and the police were called. The security staff put her out of the hospital and she tried to be violent towards me. When she returned home she threw all my belongings and everything away. I wasn't allowed to go back to the house, so I was more or less homeless. The hospital let me stay with my son.

I was put in a horrible Bed and Breakfast for a few days and ended up in the men's hostel, which was very grim. If I hadn't had ill health, I probably would have been on the streets. I went for a walk around town and saw a church. This church could have been any church and I just prayed to God, “OK God, are you in this?” And I stayed for the service and then I stayed for the coffee and a mince pie. No one

really talked to me because I had ill-fitting clothes and was a bit scruffy. But the church warden came up with a lady and she welcomed me. I told her that I'd lost everything and I didn't know if my son would ever walk again. He was diagnosed with a very rare condition, but the lady encouraged me by saying it was possible he could walk again. It nearly knocked me off my feet! When I got back to my hostel, I knelt down and gave my heart to the Lord. When my son came out of hospital we were put into a Travelodge and I started to go to church. That's now my home. For the first time people started talking to me. My vicar that if I carried on attending, they would help me. Three months later we got a council bungalow and people from the church helped to furnish it.

“ My vicar is my minister, but also my friend”

After about five months, I wanted to be open and I told my vicar I was gay. I thought he would reject me, but he was so supportive. It was a big relief. I joined the church in January 2014.

I have my struggles with emotional dependency, which is idolatry. It's a pain within you, when all you can do is think about the person. I had an attraction to the youth minister at church and told him. I then told the vicar that I would have to leave church because I'd messed up. But my vicar wanted me to stay. This was a huge acceptance of me. My vicar is my minister, but also my friend. I

had never allowed myself to have friends. Under his agreement, I am accountable to him.

We have subsequently discussed the assaults that I suffered at the hands of the Pentecostal minister when I was younger. My vicar finally validated my feelings by saying that I had been sexually abused and the minister should have been convicted. He also wanted to baptise me in my church under his leadership and with my home group present. I confessed my emotional dependency issues and there was forgiveness and care for me too. I now experience brotherly love like no other. Confessing past wrongs and present sins have brought things into the light and their power has now been broken.

TFT: And do you think that, having broken some of the hold that emotional dependency had on you, it had less power over you in the future?

Malcolm: I am aware of my weaknesses, but I now have very good friendships.

TFT: That's such a powerful story about the power of affirmation and the power of welcome. And also the power of people staying with you when you had anticipated their rejection and then they surprised you with their love.

Malcolm: I've been able to help people as well, to come alongside and support people. I am very much trusted at church and have a ministry. It's been a thrill.

My son is in a same-sex relationship

now. He knows that if he gets married to his partner I would go to the wedding because I love him, but I'm clear with him that I hold to biblical teaching and do not support same-sex sexual relationships. I know not everyone at my church would agree with that decision to go to the wedding, but I'm praying for my son and his partner to come to the Lord. There is an open door between us always.

“I've been able to help people as well, to come alongside and support people”

TFT: Malcolm, you've shared about a lot of hardship in your life and a lot of struggles with health and relationships and homelessness and sexuality. How has that affected your faith journey?

Malcolm: I have struggled with accepting that I am loved and cared for by God because I have experienced a lot of rejection and heartache. But I know that God has always been present and faithful in my life and that fact will always

crush my doubts. One of my other sons got saved three months ago! I can see God working. God has used my homelessness to speak to others, as I help those who live in hostels and need to use foodbanks. I met a belligerent man who said that no one understood his situation. I could honestly say that I did!

Sometimes I may not be changing at a fast enough rate for some Christians, but I can say that God is patient and is doing His work in me. My faith has increased so much, especially with my youngest son's healing. Bearing in mind a third of sufferers with his condition do not walk again. Over a period of about 4 years he went from using a wheelchair to walking! During this very painful process, he also passed with good grades at A level and went on to gain a first-class degree in maths. I have seen many answers to prayers in his life. I continue to pray for him to come to Christ.

Malcolm is happily and busily retired in Shropshire. He enjoys train travel, which is helped by the fact that having worked for British Rail, he gets free train travel

Voluntary Worker training weekend

On the weekend of 26-28 April, we gathered 31 voluntary workers from around the UK, Ireland and overseas for our first residential training event. It was an encouraging time, combining skills training with opportunities to build connections with one another.

"Everything was relaxed and a great sense of God's presence was among us. Everyone was learning from each other."



"The chance to reflect and split into groups to apply and discuss input was so helpful. It felt like there was space and time to reflect and develop thoughts."

