

Homosexuality in America: Retrospect and Prospect as Covenanters

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One of the hallmarks of the Covenanter heritage is a keen alertness to the social and political winds of the day with a rigorous, theological response to them. Exercised well, such a testimony is a powerful witness to the Mediatorial Reign of Christ over State and Culture, as well as Church. But sometimes, it is easy to confuse a heated moral reaction for a clear and gracious theological witness. The former approach (moral reaction) might faithfully present the condemnation of God's Law, but only the latter effort (a clear and gracious theological response) will minister the hope of his Gospel.

In this article, several key points of retrospect and prospect regarding homosexuality as an important, social issue of our day will be surveyed. The first part of this article will review key points of social and political history leading to the present shifts in cultural attitudes toward sexuality. Then, in the second half of this article some ways that the Mediatorial Kingship of Christ should frame a Covenanter perspective on those shifts will be explored, first on the frontier of personal struggle and thereafter on the frontier of societal witness. The issues touched on in these pages are deep and complex, and this contribution is offered as nothing more than a personal perspective—hopefully as an encouragement to others—in our ongoing efforts to “understand the times” and shine the light of Christ's gracious dominion across his world.

Retrospect: Changing Attitudes toward Homosexuality

The modern attitude toward homosexuality has a long history. In order to understand and respond to the view pervading America today, let us begin with three, key ideas that emerged over a course of time.

The three historical moments are in 1869, 1973, and 1980. The three, distinct ideas about homosexuality that emerged into public discourse on those three dates combine to give us the new attitude toward same-sex marriage we are facing today. Before strategies for personal and social responses to this new attitude can be discussed, these three ideas behind it must be understood.

An important clarification needs to be made up front. Care has been taken to use neutral terms like “new attitude” and “key ideas” so as not to cast wholesale aspersions on the insights inherited from this history. The biblical and confessional doctrines of marriage and of sexuality are wise, rewarding, and frankly beautiful—we must remain faithful to the hope and vision that our gracious Lord has taught us. But it would be wrong for us, as Christians, to become alarmists and assume that everything about the new attitude toward homosexuality is wrong. There are

aspects of the three key ideas—even, in some cases, key insights—concerning same-sex attraction that it would be important for us to respect, and even appreciate, without mistakenly assuming that accepting certain new ideas compels us to accept them all, or to surrender the beauty of biblical doctrine on sexuality and marriage.

Thus, a survey of these three moments in history and the new ideas they offer about same-sex attraction will be examined. After introducing each of these three ideas, some perspective for assessing what is helpful and what is troubling in each of them will be offered. After that, this article will conclude with personal and social strategies for responding to these developments.

1. *Homosexuality as Orientation*

The first point in history to note is 1869. It was in 1869 that an Austrian journalist named Karl-Maria Kertbeny coined the terms *homosexual* and *heterosexual*. These terms brought a new understanding of same-sex attraction to public attention, first in Germany and eventually throughout Europe and America.

Kertbeny was writing at a time of political realignments in western Europe. The independent states of Germany were unifying under Prussian leadership to form what would become the German Empire, and eventually modern Germany. As part of this political realignment, the old Prussian laws were being revised for use in the new German Empire. It was in this context that Kertbeny wrote his 1869 pamphlet specifically targeting the anti-sodomy laws of old Prussia. In his pamphlet, Kertbeny coined the term *homosexuality* to introduce a new distinction into public discourse about same-sex relationships.

Rather than viewing all those who engage in same-sex relations the same way, Kertbeny urged that a distinction be made. Some nurture same-sex desires by choice, and some do not choose their same-sex inclinations. Old terms like *sodomy* and *sodomite* focus on same-sex activity and therefore put all same-sex relationships into the same category. And most people in the 19th century assumed that same-sex desire was a deviation from a person's actual inner nature. The terms *homosexual* and *heterosexual* promote the recognition that one's sexual interests are not chosen as a decision of the will, but in many cases emerge along with sexual desire. As some people are left-handed or right-handed, it was often said, so some people are same-sex inclined by their own nature and others opposite-sex oriented.

That was over a hundred years ago. There has been much debate as to the whether such a concept of sexuality is valid. Medical research has, thus far, failed to locate a clear genetic or other physiological cause for sexual orientation. Nevertheless, it is difficult to ignore the mounting testimony of those—including Christians—who experience same-sex desires they did not choose, they did not want, and that cannot be simply blamed on a fault of their own actions or their parents. The debate continues to rage, and neither side has found a “smoking gun” demonstration to prove whether same-sex desires are the product of nature or nurture. Nevertheless, the scales have certainly been tipped, and by now the overwhelming consensus of experts and the general population is that Kertbeny was right. The first major idea, or perhaps insight, that led to the new attitude toward same-sex relations is the concept of sexual orientation as something innate within a person's own sexual nature, not chosen deliberately.

(A Christian Response)

What are we—personally and as a church—to make of this first new idea about same-sex attraction: that it is something innate in certain persons? The denominational paper on *The*

*Gospel and Sexual Orientation*¹ addresses this point at length, and is summarized in what follows.

Obviously, there is a lot of controversy and there are many hurting people involved in this question about the source or root of same-sex desire. Any issue that has as much at stake as this one must be handled with charity for the real experiences of those impacted, and also recognizing that objectivity is very difficult in such a climate. It is difficult to draw clear conclusions whether same-sex desires have a physiological origin, a sociological origin, a psychological origin, a spiritual origin, or some combination of all the above. Christians ought not be too hasty to jump on the latest bandwagon, but neither ought they be too dogmatic to presume they can brush aside the mounting evidence of modern research.

The Scriptures teach that each person is born with a sin nature, which means that the deck is stacked against each and every individual from the beginning. Everyone experiences his sinful human nature with its different inclinations and vulnerabilities. If same-sex desires are, in some cases, rooted in an individual's very nature, this does not mean the tendency is godly. But it does mean that those who experience these struggles may not have chosen to feel them, and Christians should demonstrate compassion in our prayers and care for brothers and sisters who have these struggles.

Jonathan Edwards wrote about such innate weaknesses a full century before same-sex desires came to be recognized as being so deeply rooted in human nature. In his "Treatise on Religious Affections," Edwards wrote, "Allowances, indeed, must be made for the natural temper, which conversion does not entirely eradicate: those sins which a man by his natural constitution was most inclined to before his conversion, he may be most apt to fall into still... Though grace ... does not root out an evil natural [disposition], yet it is of great power and efficacy to correct it... The *old man* is put off, and the *new man* put on... Converting grace will make a great alteration in him, with respect to these evil dispositions; so that however he may be still most in danger of these sins, they shall no longer have dominion over him...."²

Do you sense the admission of struggle, yet the confidence of victory, in Edwards' words? He is simply expressing the teachings of the Apostle Paul who wrote extensively of the real—but hopeful—struggle we each fight against our own sin nature. Including our innate sexual lusts, of all varieties. It is unbiblical to single out same-sex attraction as somehow uniquely disoriented or damaged; the truth is that we all must come face-to-face with our innate inclinations to selfishness, pride, lust, sinful despair, bitterness, and other natural tendencies that are displeasing to the God who made us for holiness and beauty. And like Edwards, we cling to God's grace as a converting and a sanctifying grace, giving us hope and real experience in new life and victory.

There are two theological terms to introduce at this point. In the Reformed tradition, the sinful inclinations experienced can be identified in two categories. Theologians use the terms *original sin* and *actual sin* to make a biblical distinction.

Actual sins are, as the term indicates, sins of our own will. Sins of choice. Notice the word "act" in "actual sins." The term is not used to imply that original sin (the other category) is any less real or any less sinful. But *actual sins* are the sins brought upon ourselves by our own will, whether enacted by our hands or carried out in our thoughts. We praise God that his mercies are

¹ Michael LeFebvre, ed., *The Gospel and Sexual Orientation* (Pittsburgh, PA: Crown and Covenant, c2012).

² Jonathan Edwards, "A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections in Three Parts," part 3, section 7, in *The Works of President Edwards* (New York: Leavitt, Trow & Co., 1848), 3:156–7.

so rich and so free: he patiently provides for our forgiveness even though our actual sins, committed willfully, are so abundant!

Virtually all Christians recognize the guilt we bear for our willful sins. In historic Christianity—that is, the teaching of the Reformed and medieval and early church—the stain we bear from *original sin* has also been a basic point of Christian doctrine. The guilt and brokenness we bear due to *original sin* is not our own, personal fault. It is not the product of our own will, nor is it something we should blame on our parents or grandparents. We use the term *original sin* to remind us that there is sinfulness in our being that is there because of our first father's sin: the original sin of Adam.

This doctrine of *original sin* seems unfair, which is why it has fallen into disfavor in many branches of the church. Yet it is a biblical teaching that helps us to understand the presence of many ungodly inclinations we never chose. It is also a doctrine that urges us not to blame ourselves for those marks of sin, yet to own our responsibility to confess them and seek God's grace for victory over them.

In the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 6, we confess, “By [Adam's] sin, [our first parents] fell from their original righteousness and communion with God, and so became dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all parts and faculties of soul and body. They being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed, and the same death in sin and corrupted nature conveyed to all their posterity, descending from them by ordinary generation” (§§2–3).

Not everyone experiences the impact of original sin in the same way. The nineteenth and twentieth century insight that same-sex desire is often innate helps us as Christians to be more compassionate in how we view those with this struggle. Rather than viewing same-sex temptation as a result of actual sin—chosen willfully by the individual—we should regard this *temptation* as one of those tragic results of *original sin* and seek to support and encourage those who carry that particular burden in their effort to do so in a godly and sanctifying manner.

More will be said about our response to such innate temptations later. For the moment, this first theological response to this first key idea behind the modern attitude toward same-sex desire will be underscored. One should not assume that those who experience same-sex temptation chose this interest; and those who do have such feelings should not berate themselves as though they brought it on themselves. But neither should believers surrender to this or any other aspect of sin's marks on human nature.

In light of this first key idea about homosexuality—introduced to public discourse in 1869—let us exercise patience and compassion toward those who need hope, not condemnation.

2. *Homosexuality as Healthy*

The second point in history to mention is 1973. By this date, same-sex attraction had become widely recognized as an innate desire. But it was still generally regarded as an abnormal and unhealthy desire. To be more specific: prior to 1973, homosexuality was regarded in America as a psychiatric disorder. Like depression, attention-deficit/hyperactivity, Aspergers, schizophrenia, and other conditions individuals do not choose but nonetheless experience, homosexuality was regarded as a mental disorder that should be treated with the same dignity as depression and other mental disorders, but nonetheless as a disorder.

That changed in 1973 when the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the standard dictionary of mental disorders, called the DSM—the *Diagnostics and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. The primary reason for the change was the simple fact that same-sex oriented men and women are typically well-adapted participants in society. Psychiatry only

gives the label “*disorder*” to a condition when it reaches a point where it hinders a person’s ability to function. Many people struggle with feelings of being down or discouraged; the diagnosis of depression is supposed to be reserved for those whose affliction is of such severity as to hinder their ability to function. Because homosexuality has an impact on a person’s private relationships, but does not necessarily hinder a person’s ability to function on the job or at school or in society at large, it does not really qualify as a psychiatric disorder. For this reason (among others), homosexuality was removed from the DSM in 1973 and ceased to be viewed as a medical disorder.

From that date onward, this further concept was added to the emerging new attitude toward homosexuality: that same-sex attraction is a *healthy* aspect of sexuality. What is unhealthy, the line of thought continues, is for those of same-sex inclinations to be made to feel guilty about their sexuality.

(A Christian Perspective)

It is true that people with same-sex desires typically are able to function in a completely normal and healthy manner at work, at school, and in most aspects of their daily lives. Those who wrestle with same-sex desire can be thankful that their cross to bear is not as debilitating as the many disorders and struggles that some are called to carry. This world is full of afflictions that keep all of creation groaning and travailing in pain, waiting for the final redemption.

Thankfully for those whose particular struggles include same-sex attraction, that particular cross is not one that requires psychiatric treatment. Perhaps it was right for the APA to remove homosexuality from its list of mental disorders; but there are many sexual temptations that are unhealthy without rising to the level of a psychiatric disorder. We maintain that same-sex temptation, like heterosexual lust, is unhealthy. Even though we may agree at this point with the American Psychiatric Association, that same-sex desires do not necessarily make a person socially unfit.

In other words, there is a partial truth we can affirm from the 1973 idea. The old stereotype of the so-called “sodomizer” as someone who is unstable, maladjusted, and even dangerous needs to be dismissed. From leading athletes to media anchors to politicians and business leaders—it has become popular today for society’s movers and shakers to “come out” about their sexual inclinations in order to show that same-sex interests do not hinder a person’s participation in society.

But there are many sexual desires that fall short of the psychiatric label “disorder” that are, nonetheless, unhealthy. It is a mistake to think that the line between healthy and unhealthy sexual desires runs between hetero- and homosexuality. Actually, the line runs right down the middle of heterosexuality. Indeed, the vast majority of the *heterosexual* desires pervading our culture are sinful before God and unhealthy.

A recent public service announcement campaign of the Ad Council was made urging men to respect women. The Ad Council is buying space on pornography websites to post these public service announcements. Though not equating same-sex desire and indulgence in pornography, there are many struggles of a sexual nature that do not rise to the level of psychiatric “disorder” but are nonetheless fundamentally unhealthy to oneself and to society. Heterosexual desires are often just as vexing and unhealthy.

The 1973 decision of the American Psychiatric Association opened the door to a new portrayal of homosexuality in the media. Men and women in same-sex relationships are now commonly portrayed as well-adjusted, prosperous, stylish, and community-minded citizens. But many well-adjusted, community-minded individuals carry unhealthy burdens.

So, in sum, the 1973 correction can be accepted, that the old stereotype has to go. Same-sex desires do not make a person unfit for productive social involvement. Christians should attend classes, work, fellowship, and develop wholesome friendships with those of same-sex persuasions just as they would with those struggling with heterosexual desires, or economic fascinations, or prideful yearnings, and so forth. Nevertheless, same-sex desires are not healthy. Like all other unhealthy desires that afflict the human soul, same-sex desires need to be confessed before God and brought under the dominion of his mercy and grace. Like every other desire that arises from our sin nature.

3. *Homosexual Marriage as a Civil Right*

The final date to highlight is 1980. In August of that year, the Democratic National Convention met at Madison Square Garden in New York City. Some of the leading issues of the day included immigration reform and government wiretapping to pursue foreign intelligence.

Homosexuality was also addressed at that convention, with the following statement added to the party platform that year: “We must affirm ... the right of each individual to have equal access to and participation in the institutions and services of our society. All groups must be protected from discrimination based on race, color, religion, national origin, language, age, sex or *sexual orientation*.”

With that statement, one of the major political parties turned homosexuality into a *civil rights* issue. The third idea that has brought the new attitude toward homosexuality is that introduction of *sexual orientation* as a civil rights issue alongside race and gender. “The institutions ... of our society” must be equally available to all, regardless of “race, color, religion” and so on, now including “sexual orientation.”

Now, sexual orientation had never been a basis for legal exclusion from any civil benefits to the extent race had been. There were never laws in place banning homosexual men or women from sharing the same water fountain, or sitting in the same part of the bus as heterosexuals. Thankfully, society has made slow, painful, but real progress on racial civil rights. There had never been such a litany of legalized restrictions against homosexuals quite like the legalized segregation of race.

The one (quote) “institution ... of our society” (close quote) eventually found to be as “discriminatory” against homosexuals is marriage. Without denying the reality of other prejudices in other institutions of American society, the alleged discrimination of sexual orientation that was entrenched in law was marriage.

It would take a generation for the movement to unfold, but at that convention in 1980, homosexuality was changed from a moral issue into a civil rights issue. Who wants to be identified with the painful tragedies of racial discrimination in our nation’s past, by opposing the latest frontier in civil rights?

(A Christian Perspective)

The Christian response to this third idea is to agree that a change in marriage law *would* be the necessary next step, if homosexual orientation were a healthy, morally valid expression of human sexuality. The church shares the zeal for civil equality, but humbly appeals the underlying assumption. A biblical vision of sexuality and marriage leads the church to differ on the underlying presupposition. Same-sex desire is one of many experiences that arise from our sin nature inherited due to original sin. But same-sex desire is not a wholesome expression of sexuality as God created it.

However, it is not enough to hold up a stop sign and oppose same-sex marriages. The gospel is a proclamation of hope, and if no message of redemption for those wrestling with same-sex temptations is offered, what message does the church have for other similarly deep and difficult temptations?

* * *

Those are the three, key ideas that have produced the new attitude toward homosexuality we are facing in the present generation:

1. The idea introduced into public discourse in 1869—that same-sex desire is an innate experience, not a willful choice.
2. The idea introduced into public discourse in 1973—that same-sex desire is a socially healthy experience, not a disorder.
3. The idea introduced into public discourse in 1980—that same-sex desire is not a moral issue, but a civil rights issue.

Christians cannot naively brush these ideas aside completely; but neither can they blindly embrace them wholesale. There are aspects of profound insight and helpful guidance to be appreciated in these three ideas. But there are also aspects that cannot be affirmed by those captivated by the beauty of the gospel and the vision of society, marriage, and sexuality taught by our Savior.

In love for all who need God's grace, men and women everywhere must be humbly urged to acknowledge their sinfulness—both the marks of original sin and Then, strategies for responding to these developments on the level of social change will be given.

Prospect: The Personal Battle

How does one respond to same-sex desires on a personal level? Is it a losing battle? Absolutely not. There are two points, however, that are important for a proper response to same-sex temptations.

1. Recognize it as Temptation

First, same-sex temptation must not be treated as though it is somehow different from other temptations, requiring some different kind of solution.

The Bible does not give us a special epistle, providing unique instructions for handling same-sex temptations as though same-sex inclinations are a more difficult kind of temptation, or that they require different techniques, than other temptations. Of course, there are some practical differences in responding to different temptations: if one struggles with temptations to overeat, Christian prudence would avoid stocking the fridge with stumbling blocks; and if you struggle with sexual desires, different *practical* safeguards are prudent. Certainly there are practical differences that this unique struggle call for; but fundamentally, same-sex temptation needs to be recognized as one of many kinds of temptations to be handled like other temptations.

In Paul's sixth chapter of First Corinthians, and in the first chapter of his Epistle to the Romans, Paul speaks about same-sex sins. These are two New Testament texts often cited to address homosexuality questions. But one of the most important points drawn from such passages is the

fact that same-sex sins are included in lists of all manner of human temptations. It is not a “super sin” in a category on its own.

It is true that some kinds of temptations are more difficult to bear than others. Some are less burdensome than others. Some people experience a greater degree of temptation in a given area, while others with the same weakness experience a lesser degree of temptation. All temptations are not equally felt. But the same biblical instructions for dealing with a propensity toward bitterness, a weakness for overeating, a desire to look lustfully at the opposite sex, a tendency to look down on others and think pridefully of myself, and all the other sinful temptations human experience in various ways—the same biblical resources for victorious battle against all these temptations are also provided for our sanctification in the face of same-sex temptation.

The Apostle Paul wrote, “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it” (1 Cor. 10:13). Those words are to encourage Christians not to fall into the lie of believing particular areas of temptation emerge from a different category of struggle than those experienced by others in the same pew at church. Furthermore, Paul’s words are not mere rhetoric for nice people with (seemingly) easy problems. Paul wrote those words to the congregation in Corinth—a congregation notorious in the pages of Scripture for their intense, even bizarre struggles with sin. Including same-sex sins which Paul specifically identified as among the struggles faced by Christians in Corinth.

The first point proposed for a personal response to this battle is to avoid viewing same-sex temptation as though it requires a different solution than other temptations.

2. Use the Means of Grace

Every one—in each of his various temptations—needs the daily and weekly grace of Christ for consistent victory captured in the old fashioned doctrine of sanctification. Christians fail to appreciate how wonderful and real the work of sanctification is in the believer’s life when they imagine they need some different answer to the particular temptations they face (whatever those temptations may be).

The Spirit’s work of sanctification is a process that brings real growth and real victory over sin. But it also happens to be a patient work involving perseverance and faith. Living in a society that prizes one-time, quick solutions, patience is not valued as it ought to be. One can doubt whether any other solution is even worth trying. The search for a single-treatment fertilizer that will kill the weeds in a yard forever will yield that no such product exists. Rather, a lawn must be re-treated every Spring and every Autumn for there to be progress. Weed-killing and grass-feeding are patient works. So it is with sanctification. It is not a weakness of God’s grace, but his design, that sanctification unfolds over time as Christians persevere in the means of grace.

Joe Dallas is a Christian counselor and speaker who has written several books on overcoming same-sex temptations. In one of his books, he writes, “I have seen plenty of successes. But there are plenty of failures, too. And among the failures I have seen two common elements: wrong motivation and unrealistic expectations.”

The *wrong motivation* refers to Christians who want freedom from same-sex temptation simply to feel better about themselves—to correct something they feel embarrassed about. Sanctification certainly does bring personal peace and joy; but the right motivation for sanctification is never “self-fixing,” but “Jesus-honoring.” Grace will not persevere if our the is self-centered rather than Christ-centered. The *unrealistic expectations* common among those who give up the struggle refers to those who expect same-sex temptations will go away all of a sudden. The struggle with this temptation—like all temptation—calls for patient perseverance.

In all areas of our Christian growth—including but not limited to same-sex temptation—confidence in the biblical doctrine of patient, persevering sanctification must be recovered. Patient sanctification brings real victory and growth through daily and weekly participation in the means of grace.

The wonderful truth about biblical sanctification is that growth in grace occurs as time is spent in fellowship with Christ. In fact, maybe that is why God designed sanctification to be an ongoing process, rather than a quick fix. The means of grace appointed for growth are, essentially, means by which one communes with Jesus. Recovering confidence in the means of grace will help in overcoming daily temptation.

Many think that personal Bible study and Sunday worship are times to look for new, life changing truths. Yet Sunday worship is not necessarily about life changing experiences. Sabbath worship happens weekly because its purpose is much more modest and fundamental. Lord's Day worship is a time to come to Jesus who tends to a believer's wounds after a week of struggling with the world. It is a time to revisit the wonderful, resurrection promises of Jesus—promises not forgotten but that have begun to fade in the face of all the pressures and strains of the week. Worship is a time to renew the Christian's hope in the power of those resurrection promises. Sabbath worship is a time to meet with Jesus to be refreshed in faith and launch into another week, equipped to walk victoriously—if not perfectly—before Jesus brings his people back for another washing in his grace.

It is wonderful when God's Spirit does bring dramatic, life changing moments! He is able to heal, and he does delight—sometimes—to bring sudden changes in hearts. Jesus instantly healed *some* people during his earthly ministry. He did that, but not because those individuals deserved it. He instantly healed some so that his people could look on and know that our Savior's promises really are backed with resurrection power. By those dramatic healings witnessed in Scripture, believers know that sanctification—however fast or slow—leads to a certain and complete victory. Nevertheless, the Lord teaches the church us to rest in him through his normal means for sanctification, which centers around patient participation in the means of grace.

Sabbath worship is the backbone of weekly growth in victory over temptation. Daily, private prayer is the extension of that Sunday grace through all the week.

A vivid example of one man's approach to daily devotions is seen in the autobiography of George Müller. Müller's description of his daily devotions could be, on the whole, discouraging. He describes his day beginning with hours of peaceful meditation walking in the fields: that is simply not realistic for people. But there is one gem in Müller's description of his devotional practice that is priceless. He speaks of his daily devotional time as an exercise "to have my soul happy in the Lord."³ What a refreshing and wise piece of counsel on how to approach daily, private worship!

This is actually the teaching of the first Psalm. Psalm 1 is about the man who meditates in God's law daily in order not to fall into the ways of sin in the society around him. But notice how that Psalm begins: "Blessed," or, literally the word should be translated, "*Happy* is the man who does not walk in ways of sinners, because *his delight* is in the law of the Lord on which he meditates daily." The man in Psalm 1 finds a twofold emphasis on joy and delight in God's word. Joy that strengthens him against the false trinkets of empty joy glittering in the temptations of the world all around. That is the purpose of daily prayer and meditation: to daily refresh one's joy and hope in the Lord's promises. It is that exercise of the means of grace, daily, that is needed in this work of sanctification.

³ George Müller, *Autobiography of George Müller: The Life of Trust*, ed. H Lincoln Wayland (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 206.

Seven centuries ago, Thomas Aquinas wrote a chapter about Christian joy in his *Summary of Theology*. In that chapter, Aquinas observed that the reason we are tempted by any sin is because we do not yet appreciate the fullness of joy that is ours in God's ways. The process of sanctification really solves the problem of temptation as joy in Christ and his ways grows.

Sin and temptation will daily beat people down. Expect it. Christianity is not an escape from the struggles of life, but faith does give one God's promises and God's presence to deliver him through life's struggles. Daily devotions are to be times to drink afresh from the means of grace, to sustain joy in his promises.

The Apostle James wrote, "[God] gives more grace... Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you" (Jas. 4:5–10).

James was not writing those words to describe a one-time experience, after which the devil's temptations would nevermore be faced. He wrote those words to encourage regular exercises in prayer, repentance and faith. But notice, James writes of real victories experienced through worship! Drawing near to God, drawing upon his grace, brings real victories. As believers grow in that grace, day-by-day and week-by-week, the Spirit patiently sanctifies them.

A certain ad appears often on the internet. The ad has the photo of a bizarre looking piece of fruit or something, and the caption says something about eating this and never needing to diet again! It is a weight loss pitch. People long for the single serving, quick fix answer to all our troubles.

If a pill promises that it will shed all your excess pounds without exercise, do not believe it. Similarly, if someone offers the secret prayer, the three-step activity, or the Bible-code solution the rest of the world never saw before, that will instantly change your life, do not believe him. Rather, believe that God is faithful, and that the resurrection of Christ is the seal of complete victory over sin as you grow in Christ. That is the teaching of Scripture, and it is the testimony of his saints through the ages.

Through weekly worship and daily prayer, God's Spirit does his work of sanctification in our lives. There is victory over all temptations, including same-sex temptation. It is not a losing battle.

The denominational paper on *The Gospel and Sexual Orientation* includes a section at the back, with fourteen points of further counsel for ministering to same-sex temptations. There is certainly much more that could be said, and this section of that book provides additional encouragements. But the backbone of all victory is in right expectations concerning the means of grace.

Prospect: The Societal Witness

Finally, some remarks are offered on the societal battle over homosexuality. Many Christian circles are in panic mode over the legalization of same-sex marriages taking hold throughout the country. What can Christians do about it?

One of the unique contributions the Reformed faith—and especially the Reformed Presbyterian testimony—brings to such a time of social upheaval is a testimony of patience and confidence. One of the reasons the review of over a century of transformational ideas about homosexuality was given was to make it clear that the sudden shift being experienced today is like the

earthquake that occurs on the surface after many long years of slow, gradual shifts in plates under the earth finally release their pressure. Likewise, a cultural recovery of the biblical vision for sexuality and marriage is going to be a slow and patient process. As in the work of individual sanctification, the work of social reformation needs to be a patient work.

One of the mistakes common in American Christianity is the sentiment that the way to change society is through political power. For the last few decades, much Christian energy has been expended on changing American by pouring resources and energy into political activism. Political activism is important and has a place; but the current widespread embrace of homosexual marriage illustrates the failure of three decades of Christian efforts that put political power at the center of their moral social agenda.

In the Reformed Presbyterian Church, special emphasis is given to the doctrine of Christ's Mediatorial Kingship—that he is the king to whom even states owe allegiance. But this doctrine is different than the basic belief that drives much of the "Religious Right" today. Much of the anxiety of political Evangelicalism today is grounded in a belief that it is Christians' duty to win the nation for Christ. It is the societal counterpart to Arminianism: the conviction that believers must win American for Jesus, just as Arminian soteriology teaches that the evangelist must change the heart of those to whom he witnesses.

A critique will be made on this unfortunate view of social transformation on two points, and then an alternative will be offered. As an aid to the my critique of the Religious Right, William Symington's book, *Messiah the Prince*, will be utilized. Symington was a Reformed Presbyterian minister in Scotland at the turn of the 18th century. His book continues to be the standard work on this important doctrine prized in the Reformed Presbyterian Church.

Critique 1. Faith in Christ's Kingship

First of all, Reformed Presbyterians believe that Jesus is *already* the king over all nations. Philippians 2 tells us that God the Father already gave Jesus "the name that is above every name." We confess that passage to mean that Jesus is already king over America and all nations. His title "King of kings" is not a title waiting for Jesus in the future; it is the title he received on his ascension to the throne at the Father's right hand.

William Symington had much to say in his book about the duty of human governments to acknowledge this reign of Christ, and to obey Christ and his laws. But Jesus' reign is not dependent on the agreement of the state. His reign does not need their legislation. This is the true genius of Symington's exposition of Christ's Mediatorial Reign: we can rejoice that Jesus reigns *whether or not* the state acknowledges his ways. When we do go through times when the governments of men throw biblical truth to the wind, we need not fret. The *fact* of Christ's reign even now gives us confidence to carry on in our own service, knowing that tragic disregard of his ways cannot last forever.

Symington writes,

Christians are apt to feel discouraged when they reflect on the extensive prevalence of error compared with the limited success of the true religion, and despondingly inquire, “By whom shall Jacob arise? for he is small.” But if they can only have faith in the mediatorial dominion, they may dismiss their fears, and confidently rely in, not merely the preservation, but the triumphant success ... of the church. The Lord reigns: and the children of Zion may well be joyful in their King.⁴

Much Christian activism today partakes in that anxious inquiry, “By whom shall Jacob arise? For he is small.” There is a spirit of fear that pervades the Religious Right, as though Christians are clinging to a country that is slipping from their fingers, and they wonder which political figure or group or strategy will finally exalt the cause of Christ, “for his cause is small.” Too much hope is placed in political resources by such anxieties; and too little confidence is taken in the real, present reign of Christ.

The first critique of the so-called Religious Right is the sense of fear and urgency that drive the effort, and that focus too much of that effort on political power. Jesus is already ruling, and these social changes have not escaped his notice. To repeat Symington’s counsel: “If [Christians] can only have faith in the mediatorial dominion, they may dismiss their fears, and confidently rely in, not merely the preservation, but the triumphant success ... of the church. The Lord reigns: and the children of Zion may well be joyful in their King.”

Critique 2. Serving Christ’s Royal Agenda

The doctrine of Christ’s Mediatorial Kingship teaches that Jesus has a specific purpose that guides his rule over the state. He has explained what his political priorities are, and sadly much Christian political activism today has neglected his agenda.

Again from Symington: “[In Ephesians 1:22], The Apostle Paul ... uses the expression, ‘And [God] gave him to be head over all things to the church’—language which asserts at once the unlimited extent of the mediatorial power, *and the high and glorious end for which such power has been conferred.*”⁵ Jesus reigns, not to make America a nicer or more wealthy society; he reigns in order to order all things for the building of his church.

Modern evangelicalism leads believers to think that the purpose of Christian political influence is to promote moral values in society. The term “Judeo-Christian values” was coined in the 1950s to capture the idea of lifting the ethics out of the Bible, and leaving behind the doctrines of salvation that distinguish Judaism, Protestant, Catholic, and other Christian offshoots. All biblical faiths can agree on the basic family values of the Bible, it is argued, so Christian political activism should focus on ethical reform.

Good, moral government is much to be desired. But that is not Christ’s agenda as King of kings. His agenda is to order the affairs of human government for the furthering of the church’s gospel mission. While current events may lead people to feel like the Religious Right has largely failed to bring America around to Judeo-Christian values, the exact same events should lead the church to see that Jesus truly is advancing his political agenda. In the face of the church’s worldliness, lack of saltiness, and general weakness today, one might say Jesus is doing some

⁴ William Symington, *Messiah the Prince or, The Mediatorial Dominion of Jesus Christ* (Edmonton, Alberta: Still Waters Revival Books, 1990), 187.

⁵ *Ibid*, 71.

pretty impressive and strategically significant things in America today to wake the church up and restore its sense of calling.

Though speaking, admittedly, in very broad strokes, here is the summary of the two critiques of the “Religious Right”:

1. First: Jesus is already King of kings; believers need not grow anxious and should not focus so much of their hope on political power.
2. Second: Jesus’ agenda as King over America is to see his church prospered in the mission he has given to her; the church should never plagiarize ethical values from the Bible and leave behind the Gospel and call it a *Christian* influence.

What then should be the church’s response to the profound moral shifts taking place in American society, including shifting attitudes toward homosexuality?

Social Change by “Faithful Presence”

James Davison Hunter recently wrote a book called *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*.⁶ One of the major propositions Hunter makes in his book, is that social change is not achieved through politics but through the whole complex of leading social institutions, such as academia, entertainment, the news media, and so forth. Political institutions are a part of the fabric that shapes society, but only a small part. Christians have tended to place too much emphasis on political power, while complaining about the “secular media” and “secular academia” without engaging meaningfully in those other institutions.

Usually, by the time an issue like abortion—or homosexuality—reaches the political sphere, society has already made its transition. Rather than buying into political activism as the primary means to pull society from the brink, Hunter argues for an approach he calls “faithful presence.” Christians need to be present, as a faithful witness, in all of the spheres of social influence. Politics is among these, but really of less significance than science, entertainment, media, and such circles.

Hunter is correct. As the three key points in the long history of changing ideas about homosexuality illustrate, the process that has brought about the new attitude toward homosexuality has been a long one. The earthquake may be happening rapidly right now, but the tectonic shifts have been taking place over many generations in the fields of medicine, sociology, science, philosophy, psychiatry, and eventually politics.

Social changes experienced today should not lead to alarm. Instead, they should lead the church to call upon Christian young people to study for various professions, and to enter the many institutions of society to have a “faithful presence” there. And to do so resting in the confidence that Jesus reigns.

Christians do not need to try to coordinate their influence, trying to change America within a generation. There is no need to develop a central think-tank that networks and strategizes a Christian takeover of American thought centers. Saving the world must be left to Jesus. Meanwhile, believers should be faithful to promote the patient sanctification of society through

⁶ James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, c2010).

“faithful presence” while patiently persevering in their own sanctification through faithful worship.

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