Homosexuality in the Context of Christian Sexual Ethics

Part 2 of 5: Studies and Research on Homosexuality
with Stanton Jones, Darrell L. Bock, and Michael Brown
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Darrell Bock: Well, I'm going to shift gears a little bit, Stan, by talking about your own expertise, and that is you're a professor of psychology and you've worked and written in this area. What do you regard as some of the more important studies that have been done that reflect the research and what's going on with homosexuality and what can we say about it?

Stan Jones: I might say a quick word about how I got involved in this at all, Darrell. It was just almost an accident in my graduate training that I got some training in human sexuality. And so when I arrived at Wheaton College I kind of drew the short straw, as the only person who had any graduate training in it, to teach a course for our master's program in sexuality. And as I got more and more engaged with the primary literature, you oftentimes really learn something when you teach it, and I got engaged in that primary literature and I began to see this ideological slant that was growing even then in the 1970s to use scientific research for ideological purposes.

And the first place I saw it was in the commendations of cohabitation and the sort of strident stances that people would take that had no grounding in the actual research literature that cohabitation was good for people. And I looked into that and found that essentially every study that's ever been done on cohabitation shows that cohabitation is worse for people, that you have higher breakup rates and higher abuse rates and higher sexual infidelity rates and on and on and on. And then I got interested in the way that, in the same way, same-sex relationships and bisexuality were being pushed. And what I found coming at the church was several really crucial arguments where science was being used as a bludgeon to move the church off its traditional moral teaching.

So you ask, you know, what are some of the most important findings? I think two major things come to mind. One is the argument that homosexuality is a natural biological condition and therefore it can't have any moral consequences. And the other is the argument that it's impossible for sexual orientation to change.
And just to pick two studies out of the many, in terms of homosexuality being genetic, the best recent study published in 2010 was a study from the twin registry, the identical twin registry for the nation of Sweden. And they found 71 identical twin pairs – these are genetically identical twin pairs, usually raised together. They found 71 twin pairs where one of the identical twins fit the category of being gay. And what they actually found was that in only 7 of the 71 pairs was the second identical twin gay. Now when you equate sexual orientation with race and say sexual orientation is a civil rights issue because it's just like skin color, it's just like race, well, 100 percent of those identical twins are the exact same race, but only 10 percent of the twin pairs were actually matched for their sexual orientation. And so something's very, very wrong with that analogy.

We actually don't know what causes homosexuality, but there's a sense in which does it make any difference from the moral perspective? Many critics of Christianity say something can only be moral if you had the choice in framing it, but the fundamental Christian message about sin is we didn't ask for this. We're born in original sin, so the idea that it has to be voluntary doesn't make any sense from the moral perspective that Christianity would hold up.

Similarly the issue about change. The argument is often made that change is impossible and, therefore, that you can't have moral objections to homosexuality because God would not object to that which a person cannot change. And in 1 Corinthians 6 it talks about, you know, the following people will not inherit the kingdom of God and homosexual persons, homosexual actors, are on that list. And it says, "Such were some of you." Well, I think it's naïve for Christians to assume that those people were necessarily converted instantaneously from homosexuals to heterosexuals. The opposite of sexual immorality is not heterosexuality. The opposite of sexual immorality is morality, it's chastity, it's purity. And so I think that what that passage teaches us is that it is possible for people to be freed from a bondage to this kind of sin.

And this is one area where I've actually added an original scientific contribution. There was dozens of studies saying that homosexuality can sometimes change that were published between the 1940s and 1970s. But as the atmosphere of the mental health establishment changed during that time, there's actually been only three major studies that have been published in peer reviewed journals since 1981, and one of them was by a psychiatrist name E. Mansell Pattison that was published in 1981. The second one was Robert Spitzer's study in 2003, and the third one was the one that Mark Yarhouse and I just published in 2010 in the <i>Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy</i>.
And we actually did what no other researchers have done before, and this we followed a group of people longitudinally over time, over a six-year period. And we found that some people went back to the gay lifestyle after trying to change through the group Exodus, but we also found that some people achieved and maintained stable chastity in singleness, and they reported that this was satisfying, that they considered this to be a success, that they did not identify their primary sort of status in life as being gay, but rather they identified their primary status in life as being Christian.

But there was also a group of people who had moved from being primarily homosexual to being able to function heterosexually, and so that does appear to be possible for some. I don't have any reason to think that that's possible for everybody, and I don't think the Christian faith requires that. The Christian faith requires purity, not conversion to heterosexuality.

_Darrell Bock:_ In answering your question, Michael, do you have anything you want to add as you listen to this?

_Michael Brown:_ Yeah. First, of course, great thanks, Stan, to you and Mark for the studies you've done for the book, and for the article. I've often pointed to it and said, "Here, you've got a longitudinal study documenting things." My own late brother-in-law came out of homosexuality, but it wasn't even intentional and then over a period of years noticed he was attracted to women and ended up marrying my sister-in-law, and the two of them lived a normal life thereafter until he passed away.

The fact is that there is so much pressure in the scientific academic realm to come against the idea that change is possible. The classic example: Professor Robert Spitzer at Columbia University, a pioneer that helped to depathologize homosexuality in the APA in 1973, some years later does a study wondering is it possible people can change. He interviews them, does standard interviews. He's written several hundred peer-reviewed scholarly articles. He knows how to do his research, and he listened to what the people said and believed that – as others do on the other side – and wrote his study saying, yes, some people who are strongly motivated can change.
He got blasted, vilified for it. He's now, what, about 80 years old with Parkinson's. Well, he recently wanted to retract the study, and the journal editor said, "You can't retract it. There's no error in the study. You don't retract it." Well, he's now renouncing it, basically saying, "Look, I made the error believing what the people said."

Look, he's an older man. He's been a pioneer for the underdog. In his view, his study was being misused by the religious right and so on. But he got vilified the day the study came out – vilified. Here was a man that was a pioneer for gay activism.

We see it now with the Regnerus study about kids who are raised by parents who are involved in same-sex relationships not having as good an outcome, on average, as those who are raised by heterosexual parents. He's been blasted, calls to investigate him. And why the outcry? I have a chapter in my book, <i>A Queer Thing Happened to America</i>, listing what major researchers and psychiatrists and psychologists say about the suppression of evidence from the other side. When people say, "How come we don't hear more about this?" people often risk their professional careers. If Stan wasn't at a friendly place like Wheaton, to put out a study like this could have cost him his career or any respect that would come with it.

And even on the twins study – and these have been done in quite a few nations now, some with large databases, very large databases where they've looked at things with twins – there's a nasty little secret that, even among those that come out – two identical twins that were raised in the same household that are both gay – often there's a relationship that evolved between them. There's often incest involved and that can further shape the outcome.

But the bottom line is it's not genetic, and absolutely I affirm with Stan that, even if it was, here's the simple sound-bite answer for your Christian on the street: maybe you were born that way – I don't think so – but even if you were, Jesus said you must be born again. It's a simple truth. It's that basic.

**Darrell Bock:** There was something going on with this discussion that I think is important. Stan, you used the phrase early in on your reply about the research, where you used the phrase "homosexual actor," and I think that that phrase is an important phrase to kind of get our hands around in terms of what is meant. There is the issue of identity; that it's wrapped up in this question and how it's often posed. But then there's also the issue of acting out or following through on either that perception of what one's identity is or how one thinks about identity in relationship to this question.
I think this is a huge area of conversation, particularly when you begin to interact with someone who is homosexual and who says, "I am a homosexual." They're using that as their identity. This is who they think about themselves in terms of who they are. What help or advice would you give to us in interacting with someone whose identity is wrapped up in their sexual orientation?

Stan Jones: You know, I think from a scriptural perspective it's important to point out that most of the passages that condemn homosexual immorality are focused on behavior. They said don't do this thing. But it's not the case that Scripture doesn't care about the inclinations of our heart or the direction of our desires. I think that the major message of Romans 1 is not that God sort of deliberately gives these destructive impulses to someone, but rather that these are symptoms of our human brokenness, symptoms of our human rebelliousness, and that Christ himself says out of the heart pour these immoral things.

And so our desires are not morally indifferent, but God does give us control of our actions. You and I were talking before we started taping that there's this issue that identity is viewed as something that you simply receive. It's something you sort of peel the onion, find out what's underneath, and suddenly you know what you are; and what you find there is what you embrace. That you peel the onion and you embrace what's at the core.

But I think the fundamental Christian message is really something quite different from that. It is that God holds before us the person that we ought to be. He's willing to redeem us from what we are and put us on a journey that we will never complete in this life, but rather that we will move towards, ever closer, the image of what he wants us to be, and that will be completed in eternity.

And as we deal with the secular community, we are dealing with the situation where the idea of identity has become the fundamental given, and so we do have to separate behavior and attractions and identity, and they're really not the same. They emerge very differently in the surveys. Even in the surveys in the secular scientific world, people respond very differently if you ask have you acted homosexually, do you have homosexual or same-sex desires, and do you embrace same-sex identity. And there's seven, eight, nine, ten percent of the population that experiences some form of same-sex desires, and yet a smaller percentage – probably three to four percent – ever engage in same-sex behavior. And then in terms of embracing the identity, it's smaller yet.
But the gay activist community, as Michael is saying, wants to treat that sexual identity is sort of an undissolable entity; it's something that if a person says, "This is my identity," that can't be questioned. But I think, again going back to Michael's earlier definition of the gospel, where we're called into dying to self and becoming alive in Christ, to become alive in Christ is to say, "I want to lay how I even construe myself before God, and I want to have the kind of relationship with God where he is calling the shots, where he is shaping my identity. And I don't define myself. God defines me."

**Darrell Bock:** And so the key idea here is that the core identity becomes the sense of being a Christian and wanting to live out the way God has intended for human life to be lived, the way he's designed it, in contrast to simply following through on whatever desires I might have.

**Stan Jones:** That's right. And I think this is an area, again, where the evangelical church can fail us sometimes, because with our emphasis on defending the family we present that the only form of fullness that God wants for you is the nuclear family, so you need to experience that conversion and quickly make it over to the heterosexual side and so forth and so on. And that's a wonderful blessing when it happens, but it's not the only path. So single people are capable of growth in Christ-likeness and that is a great gift.

And the difficulties that we experience along the road are part of the challenge, part of the shaping process. Those difficulties can be used by God just as powerfully as the things that are seemingly blessed. Michael mentioned just Robert Spitzer being diagnosed with Parkinson's. It's odd – he was the last person to publish a major study. I was more recently published, and I have Parkinson's disease. And so what I'm experiencing is some increasing complexity of my life, some difficulty in my life. But it is amazing the way that God uses these difficulties to shape and mold us, and that we can experience in brokenness a closeness with Christ that is part of what it means to be shaped in his image.

**Darrell Bock:** And so sometimes when we get into this discussion, it's like homosexuality is kind of in this special category, and they're different than everybody else, and it's us and them and those kinds of things. But really what I'm hearing you say is we all struggle in the area of sexuality. It may not be in this particular area, but we all have issues where we're called upon to respond differently than the way maybe desires that seem to pop up innately within us surface.
Stan Jones: That's right.

Darrell Bock: And that this is part of the walk of the commitment of being committed to where it is God is taking, and trying to take, all of us. And so for some it may involve homosexuality. For others it may involve issues related to lust. For single people, it's disciplining their sexuality until they come into marriage. This works in a variety of realms, in a variety of ways, and touches everybody. No one is excluded from the kind of – I'm going to use the word – "orientation" to God that is designed to trump or transcend other orientations we may have.

Stan Jones: That's right. You know a great example, Darrell, is I'll never forget my conversation with the first person I ever met who had experienced significant transformation from living the homosexual lifestyle into one of the more dramatic sort of healings and reorientations I've ever seen. And I'll call this guy Fred. But at the time I met him he'd been married for 13 years, had 5 children, and was a loving father and doing great. But he had been deeply immersed in the gay community from age 14 for 13 years until he was 27, when he heard the gospel, responded in a radical and distinct way. God called him into marriage.

And I'll still remember the part of the conversation where I said to him, "So, Fred, so you have – but you have switched from being a homosexual to being a normal heterosexual." And he said, "Absolutely not." And I was rather shocked by his response. I said, "What do you mean you're not a normal heterosexual?" And he said, "To be a normal heterosexual male is to experience sort of promiscuous impulses that are sort of the bane of your existence. It's to experience lust and to be drawn in many directions." He said, "God has given me a great gift." He said, "I still struggle with homosexual impulses, but God has given me sexual desire for my wife alone among women." And he said, "I'd much rather carry this gift than to struggle with the way that many heterosexuals struggle."
And so all of our sexual desires are broken. Our sexuality is broken. Our sexuality is tied into our desire for human connection, for bonding, and so there's all kinds of disabilities, if you will, that are built into that. We're all on this journey of learning how to love more, how to give more. For those of us who are married, we're learning what it means to be united in one flesh. We're learning what it takes to die to self and offer up, in submissiveness to the other, the gift of the self to the other. And that's a great challenge, but it's really, really something that requires a lot of difficulty and challenge along the way.

Darrell Bock: Michael, we're talking about, of course, how orientation relates and how Christian orientation – if I can use that phrase since "orientation" is a big word – can transcend other types of orientation or identities that we may possess or feel that we have. What have you seen on this question?

Michael Brown: Sorry, I dropped out there for a moment. Not sure what happened. I heard a former lesbian say this, and it ties in with Stan's comments about the opposite of immorality is morality. She said, "God never said 'be thou heterosexual because I, the Lord thy God, am heterosexual,' but 'be thou holy because I, the Lord thy God, am holy.'" So we understand again that is the goal; that's what we're all striving after. Which is why, when we recognize the behavior issues, I always tell pastors and leaders, "Don't say homosexuality is a sin. Say homosexual practice is a sin, lest you condemn the person for having desires or thoughts or impulses."

Also, today's society – and especially the gay community – wants a Jesus who practices what I call affirmational inclusion. He accepts me as I am and affirms me for who I am. I say that Jesus practices transformational inclusion. He receives us as we are, and transforms us into his image. What we will hear from the homosexual community – and it's something we need to be challenged by – is this: look, it's one thing for you to be chaste as a single person because you know there's the potential for marriage. But here I'm 18 years old; I'm gay – it's who I've always been; I'm going to come to Jesus in your church and that means I'm going to have to be alone until I die at the age of 88? That's your gospel?
What we have to say again is, first, I yield my entire life to Jesus without condition, whatever he wants, whatever he desires, by life or by death. That's a normal New Testament commitment. And if he calls me to be single or if he gives me the gift to be married, I'm his disciple anyway. But the church needs to really recognize the struggle and get alongside of people, especially some who've come out of a very promiscuous lifestyle and will have more falls than they'll have success for a little while. That's where the body just has to say, "Hey, we love you. We're with you. We're not ostracizing you, and we're not looking at you any differently."

But I've asked this and I've never once gotten an answer in dialogue and interaction with gay activists. I am absolutely not comparing your average gay man or woman to a pedophile. I'm not making the association. I'm not putting them in the same group. But the research on pedophilia would also say no one chooses it. I mean who in their right mind would choose something like that? The research would often indicate it's the same as left-handedness. The very same arguments that are used to sanction homosexual practice are often used to sanction pedophilia.

What do we tell someone who has those horrific perverse desires? There's no outlet for them. We're sorry. We know you're struggling, but this is absolutely contrary to everything that is best for you and for God and for society and for other children. There are certain things – here's a man who's married and his wife has a serious injury or handicap and they cannot have sexual relations for the rest of their marriage. What do we say? We ultimately say Jesus is enough, and if we'll give ourselves to him, with the help of a loving community, he can make up for that lack.

And then the last thing – I've asked gay men and women, "Can I embrace you as a fellow human being and love you and care for you as a neighbor and citizen without endorsing or celebrating your sexuality?" They've often told me no – I'm a homophobe; I'm hateful. And we have to push through that. There's no hate in that. There's actually love behind that. But the thing has been so enmeshed in our society, it's up to us as God's people to put this in proper order, and our communication is so important.