

Can Followers of Christ Have Sexual Identities?

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In the house where I grew up, on a bookshelf in the middle of the upstairs hall, my parents kept three or four books for Christian young men learning to respond to sexual temptation with integrity. When the chimes of my biological clock began announcing puberty, I made my dutiful pilgrimage to that bookshelf.

From those books, I learned that Christian young men needed to reckon honestly with the reality of our sexuality. We needed to be cautious of where we let our eyes linger and avoid situations that exacerbated temptation. We needed to be open with one another and hold one another accountable. Instead of feeling shame and self-hatred when we experienced arousal or attraction, we needed to submit our involuntary impulses to the lordship of Jesus, choosing not to fantasize about or pursue sexual gratification outside the covenant of marriage.

All this might have been decent advice for a boy my age, if it had been written for me. But it wasn't written for me. It was written for the kind of boys whom today's parlance calls 'straight'—boys whose involuntary arousal and attraction were triggered by women (and only by women). *These* boys were the ones called to openness and honesty, the ones who

needed to name and acknowledge their sexuality in order to guard wisely against its temptations and learn to steward it well. *These* boys were the ones whose shame could be supplanted by a vocation of obedience.

For me—a young man attracted to other men, and not to women in the slightest—the shame had no such reprieve.

When I began, more than a decade later, to publicly call myself a 'celibate gay Christian', I was motivated in part by a desire to see the wisest insights of those old books extended to boys like me. I hoped that those of us whose experience of sexuality looked different from most of our peers' experiences might still find guidance, hope, encouragement toward holiness and freedom from shame within the family of God.

Adopting the word *gay* was not, for me, an attempt to declare a totalizing new identity which superseded my identity as a follower of Christ. It was simply an attempt to communicate as honestly as I could to as many people as possible. Along with many other same-sex-oriented Christians, I have found that words like *gay*, *lesbian* and *bisexual*—words collectively known as sexual identity labels—can facilitate important conversations about vocation and obedience to Jesus for

those of us with non-normative experiences of sexuality.

In many evangelical spaces, however, to refer to oneself as gay while continuing to uphold the historic Christian sexual ethic is to court controversy. Critics of sexual identity language worry that, by adopting such language, people like me accord too high and too fixed a status to our sexuality. For these critics, naming sexual identity and asserting the likely permanence of sexual orientation in this lifetime signal the adoption of unbiblical anthropological categories which blunt the keenness of our devotion to Christ. Far better, the critics argue, for us to name our sexuality only in terms and categories drawn directly from the Bible.

This essay considers how biblical anthropology should inform and delimit the evangelical Christian debate over sexual identity. First, I lay out some of the most prominent objections to sexual identity categories and language, examining the underlying claims about biblical anthropology which motivate these objections. Second, I turn to the question of grammatical ontology, proposing that the categories of identity and being do not function as monolithic in the biblical texts. Third, I suggest how sexual identity labels equip us to grapple pragmatically with the current postlapsarian state of all humanity, as well as how such labels might catalyze anthropological investigation which limns the goodness of God's original design. Finally, I caution against over-extensions of biblical anthropology which seek to extract from the Bible answers to questions the Bible does not intend to answer.

In defending sexual identity language, I am not insisting that all who

experience some degree of attraction to the same sex *must* describe themselves with such language. Rather, I simply wish to demonstrate that those of us who do find sexual identity labels helpful *can* indeed use them without altering our cardinal identity as followers of Jesus. By recognizing the linguistic latitude that exists for Christians in the realm of sexual identity, evangelicals can avoid placing unnecessary burdens and strictures on same-sex-oriented people seeking to follow Jesus.

I. Understanding Opposition to Sexual Identity

Criticisms of the term *gay* (and comparable terms like *lesbian*, *bisexual* and *queer*) as applied to Christians with a historic Christian sexual ethic can be (and have been) levelled at a variety of registers. However, the specific criticism with which we are here concerned centres on the notion of identity. Rosaria Butterfield states the case succinctly: 'You cannot have union with Christ if you have made an identity out of anything else, including your sexuality.' Butterfield argues that the demands of Christian identity are so total that they require disidentification from any other competing identity. The verbal acknowledgment of any sexual identity recognized by modern categories of sexual orientation is, she argues, an extra-biblical nomenclature that thereby contradicts biblical conceptions of sexuality. She concludes, 'Sexual identity is incompatible with union with Christ.'¹

¹ Rosaria Butterfield, 'Why "Celibate Gay Christianity" Is Not Reformed and Biblical

Various forms of Butterfield's argument have been echoed by a number of prominent evangelical leaders—especially those who hail from Reformed traditions—including Albert Mohler, Owen Strachan, Christopher Yuan and Denny Burk. Both Mohler and Strachan root their objections in 1 Corinthians 6:9–11:

Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

The fundamental flaw with identifying oneself as gay is, Mohler asserts, 'the idea that any believer can claim identity with a pattern of sexual attraction that is itself sinful. The Apostle Paul answers this question definitively' (in 1 Corinthians 6).² Strachan extends the same argument further:

Paul views the Corinthians as having broken decisively with their old identity and practice. They *were* thieves, but are not any

longer. They *were* drunkards, but are not any longer. They *were* homosexuals (whether the *mala-koi* or the *arsenokoitai*, the passive or active homosexual partner, respectively, according to the Greek) but are not any longer.³

Though Strachan makes a distinction between sexual identity and sexual practice, he argues that both gay identity and same-sex sexual behaviour are equally forbidden by Paul's words. For Strachan, the shift Paul commends to his readers is as much a shift in self-conception as it is a shift in behaviours or lusts. 'If ever there was an opportunity for Paul to allow a group of sinners to hold onto their fallen identity, it was the Corinthian church. But Paul did not encourage the Corinthians—former swindlers, idol-worshippers, homosexuals, and fornicators—to do this. He taught them gospel-driven Christianity. He taught them new-nature Christianity.'⁴

This new-nature Christianity, Strachan argues, leaves no room for a self-understanding of persistent same-sex orientation. It does, he concedes, leave room for people to continue experiencing certain patterns of temptation, but he maintains that such patterns must not be reified in the form of sexual identity. In fact, he goes so far as to suggest that identity is the linchpin of Paul's vision of holiness:

Christianity: Understanding the Vocabulary and Theology Behind the New "Gay Christian" Movement', 31 July 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xVjj_dDAXLA.

² Albert Mohler, 'Torn Between Two Cultures? Revoice, LGBT Identity, and Biblical Christianity', 2 August 2018, <https://albertmohler.com/2018/08/02/torn-two-cultures-revoice-lgbt-identity-biblical-christianity/>.

³ Strachan, 'On the Revoice Conference, "Gay Christianity", and the Apostle Paul's Showstopper Words to the Corinthians', 1 June 2018, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/thoughtlife/2018/06/on-revoice-gay-christianity-and-the-apostle-pauls-showstopper-words-to-the-corinthians/>.

⁴ Strachan, 'On the Revoice Conference'.

The key plank in the New Testament doctrine of sanctification is *identity*. ... There are Christians who are fighting all sorts of sinful attractions and temptations—this, in fact, is all of us. But there is no such thing as gay Christianity. There can be no connection between Christ and Satan, the flesh and the Spirit, the church and the world. If we teach that there is, we dishonor, disobey, and even silence the words of the apostle Paul to the Corinthians.⁵

That Strachan's argument depicts the whole experience of being gay as always and only sinful should not be missed. Indeed, when critics of sexual identity language lay out their alternative proposal for the categorization of same-sex sexuality, using the categories available within their biblical anthropology, they almost unanimously place it within the category of 'sin'. On these grounds, Christopher Yuan argues that all talk of 'sexual orientation' among Christians ought to be exchanged for talk of sin and sanctification:

When there's a choice between a biblical framework and a secular one, should not Christians favor the biblical over the secular? And might God's word provide us a better framework for understanding the capacity to experience unchosen and persistent sexual and romantic desires toward the same sex?

Yes, it does. That framework is called *sin*.⁶

Yuan is quick to clarify that the sin of same-sex attraction is not 'actual sin' but 'original sin'. A person is therefore not morally culpable, he argues, for simply experiencing the capacity for same-sex sexual temptation. Yet this capacity is nonetheless sinful because of its etiology in the Fall, and Christians must therefore seek to distance themselves from it and refuse to identify with it.

All these arguments share a resistance to nomenclatures developed from anthropological sources other than the Bible. Secular anthropological divisions are regarded as irreparably infected by the secular worldviews of those who developed them; as Butterfield writes, 'Words, like kitchen washrags, carry and distribute history (and bacteria) with each use, and the category-invention of sexual orientation brings much bacteria with it.'⁷ Thus, Denny Burk argues, 'If there is to be a recovery and renewal of Christian conscience on sexuality issues, secular identity theories must give way to God's design as revealed in nature and scripture.'⁸ For these critics, a biblical response to non-normative experiences of sexuality can be achieved only by rejecting all talk of sexual orientation, sexual identity, or any other anthropological nomenclature extrabiblically derived.

I share some of the theological and pastoral commitments that motivate the concerns of these critics. To the degree that any self-understanding

5 Strachan, 'On the Revoice Conference'.

6 Yuan, 'Is Anyone Born Gay?' 8 September 2018, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/is-anyone-born-gay>.

7 Rosaria Butterfield, *Openness Unhindered: Further Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert on Sexual Identity and Union with Christ* (Pittsburgh, PA: Crown & Covenant, 2015), 96.

8 Burk, book review of *Single, Gay, Christian*, 11 October 2017, <http://www.dennyburk.com/book-review-of-single-gay-christian/>.

or identity exists in competition with our identity in Christ, I agree that Christians must flee from it. To the degree that any linguistic frame invokes a logic irredeemably contradictory to biblical truth, I agree that this linguistic frame must be abandoned.

Yet the claim that sexual identity language inevitably leads into such errors—or that the avoidance of sexual identity language inoculates a person against such errors—is neither biblically nor linguistically sound.

II. The Grammatical Ontology of Identity

In Galatians 3:26–28, Paul offers a compelling account of the all-consuming identity found in Christ: ‘So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.’ The supremacy of the finished work of Christ, as received through baptism into his body, so outstrips every other differentiating identity that it renders those identities comparatively meaningless.

Some readers of Paul’s words in Galatians 3 have taken them as a prohibition of any self-identification with racial difference in the body of Christ. After all, in its most literal grammatical sense, Paul does indeed declare an ontological negation of racial difference, as well as social difference and sex difference.⁹ Verse 28 uses a

contracted form of the Greek copula (from which our English word *ontology* is derived) in each identity pairing it negates. To carry this argument to its logical conclusion, however, would suggest that Paul also wishes to prohibit Christians’ self-identification with their male or female sex,¹⁰ an implication which those who wish to avoid discussion of Christian racial difference are rarely keen to consider.

To read Galatians 3 as a prohibition of all linguistic identity categories other than Christian identity is, moreover, to read Paul in contradiction to his own corpus. Had Paul intended to forbid the linguistic identification of Christians within racial categories, then his confrontation of Peter recounted in the previous chapter of Galatians would have been hypocritical for its grammatically ontological naming of racial identity: ‘You are a Jew’ (Gal 2:14).¹¹ Had Paul intended to forbid the linguistic identification of slaves and free people with their social status and of men and women

‘nor is there male *kai* female’ may indicate that the identity at issue here is not sex per se but marital status, since the same Greek phrase *arsen kai thēlu* also appears in Jesus’ quotation of the Genesis creation account (Mt 19:4; Mk 10:6) in a conversation about the nature of marriage. The first Septuagint use of the phrase *arsen kai thēlu*, however, appears as an elaboration of the manner in which God created humankind in his image (Gen 1:27) and does seem concerned primarily with sex difference rather than marital union. Regardless of whether Paul has sex difference or marital status primarily in mind, the broader point about Paul’s treatment of identity remains unchanged.

10 Or, perhaps, with their marital status, as per the above footnote.

11 Observe the appearance of the copula ‘are’ (Greek *ei*) here.

9 Paul’s shift from *oude* separating the nouns in the constructions ‘neither Jew *oude* Gentile’ and ‘neither slave *oude* free’ to *kai* in

with their sexes, his status-specific and sex-specific statements in Ephesians 5 and 6 would likewise be verboten. For Paul, it seems, obedience to Jesus must at times be negotiated precisely through the lens of a believer's various other identities, in order to reckon well with how those identities ought rightly to inform and be informed by the believer's overarching identity in Christ.

What Paul's statement in Galatians 3, read alongside the acknowledgements of identity throughout his epistles, demonstrates so well is the reality that the secondary identities of the Christian—national identities, racial identities, gender identities, and so forth—must be at times either deemphasized or reemphasized according to situational need.¹² When too great a focus on identity difference inhibits Christian unity (especially when it serves as a rationale for inequality), Paul uses the language of ontological negation to reinstate the supremacy of identity in Christ. When failure to acknowledge identity difference results in a failure to manifest Christ within a person's particular vocation, Paul uses the language of ontological affirmation to show the continuing relevance of lived diversity within the body of Christ.

Notably, both Paul's deemphasis and his reemphasis of identity are made in grammatically ontological ways, insofar as they involve use of the copula and make claims about 'being'. For Paul, 'You are a Jew' and 'there is no Jew' are statements that must exist in tension rather than in

contradiction. The grammatical ontology of identity does not contradict its opposites. Both negation and affirmation of identity are rooted in real and necessary spiritual realities.¹³ To claim, then, as critics of sexual identity language have sometimes claimed, that the adoption of any identity beyond identity in Christ signals an obvious supplanting of Christian identity is to take a different approach to the language of identity from the one taken by the apostle Paul.

The utility of identity categories persists even when these categories include certain likely temptations towards or expressions of sinfulness. The category of 'Gentile' in Paul's day was typically marked by a neglect of service to the one true God, signalling possible proximity to a host of temptations. Yet Paul insisted that abandonment of Gentile identity was not a prerequisite for obedience to Jesus. Even today, categories of racial and national identity bring with them a vulnerability to certain temptations; one need only think of how often phrases like 'American Christian' shift from a plain statement of nationality to an assertion of idolatrous nationalism. Yet the potential for idolatry should not thereby inhibit American citizens, or anyone, from naming their nationality.

For several reasons (some of which I discuss below), I push back against the claims by critics of sexual identity language that the experiential state named by words like *gay* and *lesbi-*

¹² We might add, too, that Paul's simultaneous identification with and disidentification from several of his own identities is modeled in Philipians 3:4–11.

¹³ Regarding the objection that linguistic or grammatical opposites always indicate conceptual contradictions and therefore cannot exist in the Bible, note Proverbs 26:4–5, in which the reader is called both not to answer and to answer a fool.

an is best recategorized as sin, even nonculpable original sin. But insofar as *gay* does indeed name a set of capacities to be tempted towards certain forms of sinfulness (just as the often unnamed 'straight' orientation carries a different set of capacities toward sinfulness), I would maintain that the acknowledgement of these capacities is part and parcel of our capacity to live wisely and receive grace in the midst of them.

Those who describe ourselves with the language of sexual identity while remaining committed to the historic Christian sexual ethic are not seeking by this linguistic identity statement to displace the primacy of Christian identity. Indeed, as Johanna Finegan observes, 'If you are living in obedience to biblical teaching, abstaining from the sexual and romantic relationships you most desire ... there is no serious debate to be had over which is more central to who you are, your faith or your sexuality.'¹⁴ Rather, in making grammatically ontological statements like 'I am gay', Christians like Finegan and me are seeking to do the same identity work we see exemplified in Scripture, naming with complete honesty our experience of the world in order to best encounter Christ within that experience.

III. Acknowledging Postlapsarian Reality

I agree with the critics of sexual identity language that one component of same-sex orientation is clearly fallen

and postlapsarian in nature. I disagree that this component necessarily represents the whole of same-sex orientation, as I will discuss in the next section. I likewise disagree that the postlapsarian component of same-sex orientation ought to be classified as sin when it represents neither chosen lust nor physical sexual behaviour, nor even an active experience of temptation, but only the *capacity* to experience temptation. To name the capacity to experience temptation as itself categorical sin seems incongruous with the Bible's clarity that Jesus himself was 'tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin' (Heb 4:15). Burk argues that the temptation of Jesus was of an altogether different kind from the temptation which he classifies as sinful:

In the wilderness temptation, the enticement to sin came from Satan, not from Jesus. And that is why Jesus was able to be tempted and yet be without sin (Heb. 4:15). But when the enticement to sin emerges from our own sinful nature, that is an entirely different matter. In that case, the temptation *itself* is sinful. That is an experience that is unique to sinners and that Jesus himself never experienced.¹⁵

Burk's omission, in his paraphrase of Hebrews 4:15, of the words which emphasize the similarity of Jesus' temptation to that of his followers—'in every way, just as we are'—is perhaps telling. For Burk's argument to hold, Jesus must in fact be tempted only in some ways, not precisely as we are. Nate Collins and I have respond-

¹⁴ Finegan, 'Spiritual Friendship Pre-Conference: Johanna Finegan', 1 August 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FG0fev-WtQE>.

¹⁵ Burk, 'Is Temptation Sinful?' 11 July 2018, <http://www.dennyburk.com/is-temptation-sinful/>.

ed to Burk's theology of temptation-as-sin at some length,¹⁶ so I will not rehearse those arguments here. For the present conversation, however, the claims of Burk and Yuan that the capacity to experience same-sex sexual temptation is itself already a form of sin need not be overturned. Even if such an argument were granted, it would not thereby negate the potential value of sexual identity language for truthfully communicating postlapsarian reality.

Evangelical books for young men wishing to foster sexual purity, like the books I read as a pubescent bookshelf-lurker, tend to be united in their suggestion that men must deal openly and honestly with the temptations they experience, confess moments of failure, and set realistic boundaries so as to not expose themselves to unnecessary temptation. Though the conversations within these books usually assume heterosexual orientation, similar principles apply equally for those attracted to the same sex. Just as straight men's isolation tends to lead to unwise choices in the realm of sexuality, so too does gay men's isolation. Just as straight men would be wise to exercise caution in encounters with scantily clad women, so gay men would be wise to exercise caution in encounters with scantily clad men. Openness and thoughtful reckoning with temptation require some form of linguistic identification, regardless of whether the words we choose are sexual identity labels.

16 Nate Collins and Gregory Coles, 'Is Same-Sex Attraction (or 'Being Gay') a Sin?' *Center for Faith, Sexuality & Gender*, n.d., <https://www.centerforfaith.com/resources/pastoral-papers/03-is-same-sex-attraction-or-being-gay-a-sin>.

Once we have acknowledged that living honestly in a postlapsarian world requires some kind of linguistic acknowledgement of our own capacities for sinfulness, the case against using the word *gay* becomes somewhat murkier. If indeed same-sex-oriented people's mission is to find a word which adequately expresses their capacity for sinfulness, so that they can respond wisely to and take precautions in recognition of that capacity, *gay* seems well suited to perform that work. The objection that *gay* too plainly implicates a capacity for sinfulness makes little sense as a rebuttal here, since the risk of potential temptation is precisely the thing being named. Expunging the word from our vocabulary does not change the fact that we live in a postlapsarian world where some of us do indeed experience attraction to the same sex. As Finegan rightly quips, 'In general, outside of Christian circles, the refusal to use the word "gay" to refer to those who are predominantly attracted to their own sex is a refusal to speak English.'¹⁷ If we lose the ability to name our sexuality, we don't lose our capacity for temptation, but we may lose our ability to think clearly about how to live wisely in light of that reality.

IV. Imagining Prelapsarian Intent

Even if the term *gay* and other sexual identity labels were to refer exclusively to the capacity to experience certain forms of temptation, I would maintain that they are communica-

17 Finegan, 'Spiritual Friendship Pre-Conference'.

tively useful terms. In addition, however, I hold that acknowledging and naming current experiences of sexuality equips us not only to live wisely despite our ongoing capacity for temptation but also to discern the aspects of our experience which reflect the goodness of God's original design.

To be clear, I am not claiming that the capacity to experience sexual desire for the same sex—which is certainly a significant component of what we might call 'gay orientation'—is part of God's prelapsarian intent for humanity. Neither is the capacity to experience sexual desire for the opposite sex outside the covenant of marriage, even though that is likewise a significant component of what we might call 'straight orientation'. Indeed, to try through the lens of current human understanding and current human language to characterize the totality of God's design for human sexuality is always an anachronistic enterprise, insofar as we take words tainted by the impact of the Fall and seek to apply them to a world where the Fall has not yet occurred. To say that any sexual orientation existed before the Fall is to superimpose the brokenness of our current state back onto the wholeness of our original design.

Yet the brokenness introduced by the Fall undoubtedly touches people in different ways. Some people's pride tends to manifest in legalistic rule-following and judgmentalism, whereas others tend toward rebellion and rule-breaking. Some are predisposed towards bearing false witness in their eagerness to make everyone happy; others eagerly speak the unpleasant truth but lack an impulse towards kindness. Extroverts face different struggles than introverts, and staid

logical thinkers face different struggles than creatively unsystematic thinkers. No disposition is immune to brokenness, but not every disposition shares identical impulses towards brokenness.

Every broken disposition likewise represents an invitation to redemption. And just as the bent towards brokenness differs, so too the gifting and disposition of the redeemed person may differ. The extrovert who is easily tempted into performance mentality and reliance on other people's affirmation need not become a hermit when she is transformed by the gospel. By the same token, the introvert who repents of his general lack of love for people need not become a socialite to evince his transformation.

The naming of dispositional categories, in these cases, becomes a strategy not only for addressing the sins that are most tempting within a given disposition but also for pursuing the likely glories that await the obedient follower of Jesus within that disposition. Such dispositional identities need not be named by the Bible or traditionally included within biblical anthropology to offer potential illumination to followers of Jesus.

Take extroversion and introversion as examples. There is no direct biblical teaching on such categories of personality identity. The question of whether extroverts and introverts existed before the Fall—whether different levels of inclination to be energized by human interaction represent categorical creational differences or some complex cocktail of nurture in a postlapsarian world—can only be speculated upon, not answered definitively using available biblical evidence about the prelapsarian world. Even so, there can be great wisdom

in learning to identify personality dispositions so that we can purposefully consider how those dispositions might manifest themselves either in rebellion or in obedience to God.

In one sense, the utility of sexual identity is not far removed from the utility of other dispositional identities. The dispositions which I call ‘gay’ and ‘straight’ are both, as we have established above, manifestations of a broken postlapsarian existence. But they also both represent certain capacities toward particular avenues of holiness. For example, as a gay person with an exclusively homosexual orientation, I experience absolutely no capacity for temptation to lust after women. For myself and many other celibate gay men I know, this component of our sexuality has been at times a source of great shame, not least because it has seemed to reaffirm our calling to celibacy in an evangelical context where celibacy is rarely prized. But I have increasingly come to regard this lack of impulse towards heterosexual sinfulness—a defining component of my sense of gay identity—as a gift. Those who would understand same-sex orientation as an exclusively sinful experience seem unaware that the capacity for opposite-sex lust represents a form of postlapsarian brokenness from which exclusively same-sex oriented people like myself have been spared.

A reasoned and pastoral approach to sexuality must distinguish sinful or potentially temptation-inducing components of gay orientation from components which are not necessarily products of fallenness and may indeed reflect God’s creative intention. The goal of such moral distinctions is not, as critics of sexual identity have suggested, an attempt to deny or eu-

logize temptation and sin. Rather, the value of these distinctions lies in their removal of condemnation and shame that have taken root where God may intend his children to take delight—just as I, for example, have learned to delight in the ease with which I think of my sisters in Christ ‘as sisters, with absolute purity’ (1 Tim 5:2) and experience not even a hint of temptation to sexually objectify them. Matthew Lee Anderson puts the case for such moral distinctions well:

The point of drawing the relevant distinctions is *not* to assure people that their sin is ‘not as bad’ as they believed, but to help them *discern what their sin is—and is not*. It is possible to distort God’s grace by using it to defend a cheap leniency, which obscures the comprehensive and incomprehensible weight of His holiness. Yet it is also possible to distort it by discovering sins *where they are not*, so that the extent of His forgiveness is falsely magnified. Christians are called to confess the sins they have done and left undone—and *only* those, and *no more* than those. The ‘unfounded fears that there is sin *where there is none*’ that marks scrupulosity is still a vice, one which the use of moral distinctions is essential to avoiding.¹⁸

V. The Limits of Biblical Anthropology

I have thus far presented three de-

¹⁸ Matthew Lee Anderson, ‘Sex, Temptation, and the Gay Christian: What Chastity Demands’, 20 June 2018, <https://mereorthodoxy.com/sex-temptation-gay-christian-chastity-demands/>.

fences against common criticisms of sexual identity language. First, I have argued that sexual identity need not be read as an identity whose grammatical ontology displaces the overarching truth of identity in Christ. Second, insofar as sexuality is a postlapsarian phenomenon, some kind of descriptive language is necessary to help us grapple well with our postlapsarian reality, and sexual identity language meets this need. Third, the disposition which in its postlapsarian state is called 'being gay' can also include other components—like the absence of temptation toward opposite-sex lust—which may be part of God's prelapsarian design.

One major objection to the language of sexual identity and sexual orientation remains to be addressed. According to this criticism, using sexual identity categories is forbidden because such categories do not appear within the biblical texts. 'Everyone loses', writes Butterfield, 'when we define ourselves using categories that God does not.'¹⁹

Depending on what is meant by 'defining ourselves', Butterfield may indeed be right. Certainly, when human beings are categorized in ways that contradict God's revealed truth about us, these categorizations are detrimental and invite gentle correction. Likewise, when our most significant sources of self-understanding come from anything other than the voice of God, we are poised for either idolatry or idolatry.

If Butterfield means, however, that the use of identity categories not directly articulated in Scripture is an affront to biblical anthropology, then

she offers a severely limited vision of biblical anthropology. The Bible never purports to answer every anthropological question or provide every possible categorization. The Bible is sufficient but not exhaustive. To insist that the Bible answers every question is to do violence to the text by forcing it to speak in ways it was never meant to speak.

Although no other facet of human experience offers a precise corollary to sexuality, we could offer innumerable examples of human categories which are not discussed in the Bible but may still have explanatory value in various settings: height, body type, metabolism, coordination, IQ, neurotypicality or neuroatypicality, enneagram types, sports team allegiances. To categorize people according to these divisions is not to institute a new definition of humanity in contradistinction to that offered by God. It is, rather, to recognize the endlessly layered complexity of diversity which God has purposefully ordained within human experience.

Indeed, whether Butterfield and her fellow critics realize it or not, they are perfectly comfortable defining themselves using categories that God does not use. In a co-written essay,²⁰ Butterfield and Burk proudly identify themselves as Reformed Protestants, invoking a theological category which quite plainly postdates the Bible. The word *Reformed* appears in the essay ten times, or more often than the word *Christian* appears in the same essay. Would any of us insist that the

¹⁹ Butterfield, *Openness Unhindered*, 96–97.

²⁰ Denny Burk and Rosaria Butterfield, 'Learning to Hate Our Sin Without Hating Ourselves', *Public Discourse*, 4 July 2018, <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2018/07/22066/>.

use of this extrabiblical category is contrary to Scripture?

To use category language that extends beyond the reach of what is plainly articulated by biblical anthropology is a necessarily contingent act. That is, any category language based on experiential observation is only as absolute as the experience which calls it into being. But the contingent nature of categories does not erase their value. As my personality-test-obsessed friends often remind me, the goal of contingent personality categories is not to discretely separate people from one another but to reckon thoughtfully with the observed differences in their dispositions and experiences. A biblical anthropology which fears to acknowledge such differences is too frail to exist in the real world.

If the critics of sexual identity language were correct about the inevitable spiritual detriment of such language, my own coming out as gay

should have signalled the demise of my spiritual life. In fact, I have found the reverse to be true. Identifying myself as gay has facilitated healthy openness and relational intimacy with Christian brothers and sisters, informed wise decision making about how to pursue the vocation of celibacy with integrity, and expanded my opportunities to share with those outside the church the difference Jesus makes in my life.

Is it possible for sexual identity language to be used in unwise and counterproductive ways? Of course—just as it is possible for dispositional, national or denominational identities to be so misused. But the potential danger of words is not an argument for expunging them from our language. What matters is whether we use words in ways that speak truthfully and advance the upside-down kingdom of Jesus. I, for one, am grateful to have found sexual identity words that can do just that.