

UNDERSTANDING AND MINISTERING
TO THOSE WHO STRUGGLE WITH SAME-SEX ATTRACTION

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Abstract

It is no secret that the Church faces an uphill battle as it seeks to handle the tough topic of homosexuality. In addition to the inherent difficulty and complexity of the issue, Christians have often failed in their attempts to communicate with those who experience same-sex attraction. When it comes to homosexuality, the Church's reputation isn't great. Many pastors and Christians simply feel uncomfortable and ill-equipped to reach out and minister to people who are openly gay or who are struggling with same-sex desires. This paper seeks to help people understand the experiences and emotions of those who are gay or battling same-sex attraction, and second, to use that knowledge to equip pastors and individual Christians to better minister to and reach such people.

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Introduction

Meet Nick. It's a bit too simple to say that Nick has had a tough past. His life has been marked by struggle after struggle. It started in second grade, or at least that's the first time he can remember. He had a crush on an older boy who was in 6th grade. He didn't understand it. He felt like he was different—like he couldn't live up to the expectations that his parents and his church had for him. He grew up in a Lutheran Church, and went to a Lutheran grade school, but that didn't mean that he was taken in by a loving community. In fact, the bullying he suffered at this Lutheran school caused him to switch schools a couple of times. As Nick entered high school, he realized that he wasn't like other guys. While other guys aspired to be like their idols and role models, he was less interested in being like them and more interested in being with them.

Then Nick's life really started to spiral out of control. His side job as a DJ got him into the world of nightclubs and bars. Night after night he would party and get black-out drunk. It wasn't just alcohol, though. Nick was frequently using cocaine, weed, and ecstasy. As he puts it "I guess I was self-medicating...to get rid of the idea that maybe I was gay."¹

Everything changed when he visited his first gay bar. He felt so welcomed—so comfortable—like he finally belonged. It was all so exciting. He thought "this is what it's like to be a celebrity—to be drinking and partying. That was the life."² But the high didn't last. Nick had sex with a variety of guys, and was in a few relationships, but something was still off. In his own words, Nick said,

There were plenty of times I would cry myself to sleep at night. I was just begging "Let me wake up and let me be something different." I got sick of the drugs, sick of the drinking. But I was still doing it. I just didn't know what...I didn't know how. I got so far deep into this life, that I didn't know how to get out of it. It was like being in a hole that was dug so deep that the only way to get out was if somebody threw me a rope.³

How could you reach Nick? What could you do so that Nick feels comfortable talking to you about his struggle? What do churches need to do so that when Nick comes to church, he doesn't feel pushed away or outcast? What do you say to bring him out of his "hole?" And if he does come back to church, what does the road ahead look like? Will he stay for good? Will he give

¹ "Nick." Skype Interview (audio recorded). 10 October 2015. Nick is a young Christian who struggles with same-sex attraction.

² "Nick" Skype Interview

³ "Nick" Skype Interview

up? Will the Christian community at his local church welcome him? These are all vitally important questions when it comes to the spiritual well-being of Nick and many others like him.

In this paper, I intend to help answer some of those questions. It is my goal to help pastors and Christians feel more prepared to minister to people who struggle with same-sex attraction. This paper has a twofold purpose. First of all, I want to help you understand what's going on in the mind and the heart of people who struggle with same-sex attraction. I want you to understand what they've been through, what their spiritual struggles are, and what the future holds for them. Secondly, I want to help pastors and other Christians minister to those who struggle with same-sex attraction. By seeking first to understand the past and present struggles of those battling same-sex attraction, Christians will be better equipped to show empathy and Christ-like compassion to them.

PART ONE

Why, What, and How

Do pastors and Christians really need this help? Haven't we been over this issue enough? Isn't it in the news enough? Can't we just leave homosexuality alone? No. We can't. We owe it to each other to be more prepared and more alert to the silent strugglers among us. We will begin by investigating the why, what, and how of this issue. We'll take a look at why this topic needs to be addressed, what needs to be said about it, and how this paper will equip Christians for that task.

Why? The Problem in our churches

On Saturday night, a pastor receives an email from a delinquent member. It's from a girl who went through his confirmation class years ago. She's asking whether or not she and her girlfriend will be welcome at church. In Bible class, a member asks about her nephew's upcoming wedding to his gay partner, and whether or not she should attend. After a church service, the drummer in the worship band approaches the pastor, informing him that his son came out to him last night.

Is the pastor prepared to answer? Sure, he can say something, and he could share the basics of what the Bible says about it, but what is the best thing he can say? Perhaps the bigger question is: "How many people are there in our churches who won't speak up to the pastor about these things?" How many people are afraid to speak? How many people feel ashamed? How

many people want help, but feel unsure of what exactly they'll get from church. I'm afraid the number of people who remain silent is higher than we think. Unfortunately, a big part of their silence has to do our silence.

For far too long, we have treated homosexuality (and sexuality in general) as a taboo topic, and it's hurting us. Why is sex treated as such a taboo? First of all, our culture and media is highly sexualized. Carla A. Grosch-Miller describes the cultural atmosphere well.

Our daily lives are awash with sexual imagery, conveying what most Christians would say is an unhealthy view of sexuality: a celebration of desire without responsibility and a focus on genital gratification as the endpoint of sexual expression. Our basic human desire and drive toward embodied love is manipulated for crass purposes. Sex is used to sell cars, personal hygiene items, furniture, even food. Magazine and newspaper racks in public places display the bare breasts of young women in provocative poses. The worldwide web makes a wide range of pornography available literally at our fingertips.⁴

The sexualization of culture isn't just an issue for adults. Children experience this sexualized culture too. Studies show that this sexualization has even found its way into advertisements for children's toys and products—and it's been happening for decades.⁵

Perhaps with all this hypersexualization, we feel that the church needs to be countercultural—that the church must be the one remaining stronghold against the over-sexualization of our culture. But does that really work? Are we protecting our people or are we neglecting them? Are people only getting one clear message about sexuality—the one from their culture? Chief Sitting Bull purportedly once said, “Inside of me there are two dogs. One is mean and evil and the other is good, and they fight each other all the time. When asked which one wins I answer, ‘the one I feed the most.’” When it comes to our understanding of what is right, wrong, natural, and acceptable about sexuality, is only one dog getting fed? Are the majority of the messages we receive sent from our culture? And if that's the case, how much will our view of sexuality be shaped by the media and by our culture? The fact is, if we're only getting one message about sexuality, that's what we'll latch onto. And as much as we think we can apply from memory the biblical principles we know about sexuality, what about those younger than us? Are they able to make the same applications? Do they have the knowledge to understand that the majority of what we see about sexuality is not what God wants?

⁴ Carla A. Grosch-Miller. “Let's Talk about Sex: Equipping Ministers for the Twenty-First Century.” *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 5 no.1 (2008): 53.

⁵ Sarah Bragg, et. al, “Too Much, Too Soon? Children, ‘Sexualization’ and Consumer Culture,” *Sex Education*. 11, No. 3, (August 2011): 289.

Sure, we've managed to talk about lust and adultery in our sermons and bible studies, and we're beginning to broach taboo topics like pornography, but how often do you hear a pastor mention homosexuality in his sermons? And if he does, how does he address it? Does he talk about it as a problem that Christians in his church deal with? Or is it always described as an "out there" problem or as an unfortunate evil of our society?

As a result, we have created problems for ourselves in our churches. First of all, because homosexuality is under-addressed and avoided, Christians are left uninformed and unprepared for serving their families and their fellow Christians. Believers who struggle with same-sex attraction aren't given the guidance they need.

Secondly, if there is a message that comes from the church, it's often it's a simple message of what's right and what's wrong. Often, it's a message like this: "The world is lying to you about homosexuality. God makes it clear in his Word that homosexuality is a sin. We have to stand up against the false teaching that this world is spreading." Now, of course, all of that is true, but it's lacking. It tells Christians God's yes and no about homosexuality, but it doesn't help people serve their neighbor who is struggling with homosexual temptation. Also, it offers very little guidance to a Christian in the pew like Nick, who struggles with same-sex attraction.

So how do we solve this problem? How do we create a welcoming, compassionate atmosphere? How do we start to move in the right direction? This question is what prompted my research. I thought, "What better place could I go than to talk to the people I'm hoping to help. If I want to understand what Christians like Nick are struggling with, well, I need to talk to Christians like Nick."

As part of my research, I interviewed four Christian men who struggle with same-sex attraction. Instead of sending out surveys to a bunch of people, I chose to do in-depth, qualitative interviews with just a few. My intention with these in-depth interviews was to get beneath the surface of the issue and understand how homosexuality has impacted the lives of real people I could talk to face-to-face. The result was fascinating. These men helped open my eyes to understand what the struggle is like for a Christian who is attracted to the same sex. It is my hope that I can share with you a portion of what I learned and help you see what I have seen. Although, for reasons of confidentiality, I can't share with you the transcripts of my interviews, I would encourage you, formally or informally, to conduct your own interviews, if possible.

What: The Bible's message

Although this paper is not specifically about the Bible's stance on homosexuality, it's obviously important to lay out my assumptions about what the Bible says about same-sex attraction. I will give a brief description of the basics. If you want a more detailed look at individual passages, or a refutation of those who use the Bible to affirm homosexuality, take a look at "Bearing Their Burden" by Tom Eckstein⁶ or "The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics" by Robert A.J. Gagnon.⁷

First of all, God makes it clear in the Bible that homosexuality is sinful. All the passages that mention homosexuality speak about it negatively. Homosexuality is never condoned, and the Bible has nothing positive to say about it. However, it's important to note how the Bible labels homosexuality as a sin. The Bible doesn't single out homosexuality. The Bible doesn't place homosexuality up on a pedestal and condemn it as the sin of all sins. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, the Apostle Paul makes it very clear that homosexuality is a damning sin, and that those who commit it are deserving of God's judgment, but it's important to note that this is not the only sin he mentions.

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 (1 Corinthians 6:9-10).

Homosexuality isn't singled out here. It's mentioned right alongside other sinful behaviors and attitudes. The Apostle Paul does a similar thing in Romans 1. He mentions that, in judgment for their complete rejection of him, God allowed sin to compound and gave the people over to the sin of homosexuality.

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error (Romans 1:26-27).

In this context, it seems like Paul is making a distinction about homosexuality. He is. He's using it as an example of how man's depravity is so perverse that it goes against everything God has established. He says that God handed these depraved people over to the sin of homosexuality.

⁶ Tom Eckstein. *Bearing Their Burden*. Lulu Inc., 2010.

⁷ Robert. A.J. Gagnon. *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001.

That was God's judgment on the people. He let sin compound. However, Paul doesn't end his discourse here. He doesn't leave homosexuality as the capstone sin. That's not the whole story. The Apostle Paul goes on.

Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them (Romans 1:28-31).

Right after speaking about the unnatural, shameful sin of homosexuality, he goes on in his progression to speak about the total depravity of these people. In this list of sins, he mentions sins that many people struggle with: greed, envy, murder, deceit, gossip, disobedience, arrogance, a lack of love, and many more.

God certainly condemns homosexuality, but he also places it on equal ground with other sins in regard to its condemnation. It is no more deserving of hell than another sin. But is that how we address the issue? Or is homosexuality always mentioned as a hot-button topic, or as an evil in our society? In sermons, do pastors preach the law equally to those who struggle with gossip and with same-sex attraction? Or do we make homosexuals feel as if their sin is worse—like it's in a totally different category? Do we preach the law against those other sins and just leave homosexuality out of it because we're unsure? Do we have empathy for alcoholics and addicts, but not for homosexuals? Are we disgusted by lesbians, but not by liars or slanderers? If we desire to preach and share God's Word faithfully, and if we want to help people who struggle with same-sex attraction, we need to reexamine how we communicate God's law. We need to be sure that we're not adding a qualification or a judgment against homosexuality that's based on our own personal or cultural biases. Instead, we need to make sure we're addressing homosexuality the way God does.

This first thing that the Bible says about the sinfulness of homosexuality may not be surprising. In fact, it's the message we hear most often about homosexuality. The second thing the Bible says about homosexuality, however, is even more important than the first: God loves gays. He does. Are gays a part of this world? Then God loves them. He loves them so much that he was willing to send his only son to die for them. When Jesus died on the cross, he paid for all

sins of greed, selfishness, hatred, homosexuality, and anger. There were no sins that were too taboo to fit on the cross. There were no sins so disgusting or confusing that they weren't paid for by Jesus' sacrificial death.

When looking at God's Word on homosexuality, it's important not to overlook the context in which these passages lie. In fact, that's a common criticism of the Christian view on homosexuality—that Christians pick and choose passages. In the example above from 1 Corinthians 6, it might be easy just to talk about verses 9 and 10, and leave it at that, since those are the verses that condemn homosexuality. However, 1 Corinthians 9:11 offers some beautiful gospel comfort for anyone who is struggling with any of the sins mentioned. After his warning of the dire consequences for those that commit such sins, Paul reminds the Christians of who they are. "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 third thing the Bible says about homosexuality is a bit more subtle, but it's pivotal to understanding and ministering to those who battle same-sex attraction: facing the temptation doesn't mean losing the battle. Some people have asked me "If someone is still attracted to the same sex, can they go to heaven?" What would you say? Imagine asking the same question about a Christian teenager who is tempted daily to have lustful thoughts. In both cases, consider this: the presence of frequent temptation does not make them any less of a Christian. Just because they recognize those desires as unnatural and sinful does not mean that the devil and their sinful nature will give up and stop tempting them. This attitude envisions some sort of unreal situation in which Christians no longer have a sinful flesh. This continued struggle of Christians against their temptations isn't evidence that they've lost God's grace. In fact, that fight against temptation is every Christian's battle. The Apostle Paul himself talks about his own battle against temptation in Romans 7:15-19.

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.

Paul recognizes that his sinful nature does not define him, but it continues to affect his life. This truth is not only important for those who want to help individuals with same-sex attraction, but also for the individuals themselves.

Many Christians who are battling same-sex attraction get very frustrated that they still face the same temptations towards homosexuality that they have faced for years. But it's not as if Christians who are attracted to the same sex will suddenly be able to flip a switch and never again be tempted by attraction to the same sex. Individuals who see homosexual attraction as sin may continue to face that temptation regularly. That doesn't mean they haven't gained victory through Jesus. That doesn't mean that they remain slaves to that sin. Jesus has set them free from sin. Just because the temptation toward homosexual behavior doesn't go away does not mean that this person hasn't fully become a Christian yet. The presence of temptation in our lives does not mean that we have already lost. In fact, we know that we've already won in Christ! And that victory gives us strength to face daily temptations. We will have to battle our sinful flesh until the day we die, but we can fight those battles with the knowledge of Christ's victory. A Christian who continually struggles against the temptation toward homosexuality is no less of a Christian.

Has this always been our view of homosexuality? I must confess it has not always been mine. Perhaps this comparison will help: An alcoholic feels a constant urge to drink. He resists the temptation, but he still has to face it frequently, and it won't go away. He lapses. He asks for forgiveness. He gets clean. He stays sober for a couple years. He has a lapse and gets drunk again. He asks God to forgive him. Is this man any less of a Christian because this temptation keeps coming up? No. Can this man go to heaven? Of course! This struggle against sin doesn't mean he isn't a Christian. This is the battle every Christian faces. Compare this to a man who is attracted to other men. He feels a consistent urge to be with other men. He resists the temptation, but he still has to face it frequently, and it won't go away. He lapses and watches some gay porn on his computer. He asks for forgiveness, and yet still faces this same temptation the very next day. Does the fact that he faces this same temptation frequently mean that he is any less of a Christian? No. Can this man go to heaven? Of course!

Just because a "homosexual" Christian has to battle his sinful flesh in a very particular way does not mean that he should despair. Though God's word is clear on its condemnation of homosexuality, it is also clear about the full and free forgiveness won for all people on the cross. God loves people who have to battle same-sex attraction. He loved them so much that he sent his

son to die for their homosexual sins of thought and of action. This news of forgiveness and victory is what empowers these Christians to wake up every day and fight the battle against their particular temptation.

In order to communicate this message of forgiveness effectively, and to make the most of the relationships and opportunities God places in front of us, we need to understand the unique struggles faced by Christians attracted to the same sex. That's exactly what this paper intends to do.

How: The scope and methods of this paper

People have written a lot about homosexuality in recent years, and if you want to read about the topic, there's no shortage of books, articles, blogs, and surveys. Obviously, there are many issues within the broad topic of homosexuality that I will not address. This paper is intended, specifically, to help us deal with Christians who are struggling, confused, and concerned about their homosexual attraction. I will not be addressing in detail how to counter arguments from those who use the Bible to affirm homosexuality. I won't be trying to show how we can reach out to non-Christians who are critical of the Bible's teachings on homosexuality, though some principles I suggest may help in this regard. This paper will focus on helping people within our churches who struggle with same-sex attraction. Since my interviewees were all male, the general observations and conclusions I reach may be more applicable to males than to females. That being said, I think the majority of what I have discovered and what I am proposing applies to both genders.

Now that we've investigated the Bible's message about homosexuality and have identified where we are lacking, the next section of this paper will help us understand some of the difficult struggles people face in their same-sex attraction.

PART TWO

Understanding those who struggle with same-sex attraction

As previously mentioned, this paper has a twofold purpose: to inform and to advise. The first step to helping our brothers and sisters who struggle with same-sex attraction is understanding. If there's anything we're *not* lacking in the Christian church, it's people who think they have it all figured out. If you ever read online articles written about homosexuality, just scroll down to the comments section. Within a minute or two, you will find people speaking

quite authoritatively from biblical and anti-biblical positions. One of our biggest problems in dealing with homosexuality is that we lack understanding, and specifically that we lack understanding of what those attracted to the same-sex go through. There are three key areas that we need to understand so that we can better serve and help these people. We need to understand their past, the process of coming out, and their spiritual struggle.

Understanding their past

Remember Nick, the DJ? I wish I could tell you that his particularly difficult experience is unique. I wish that he was an anomaly, but he isn't. There are many others like him who have had a very difficult past specifically because of their same-sex attraction. You may meet people like Oliver. Oliver is now in his late 20s and works in the medical field. Oliver told me that it was in 5th or 6th grade when he first noticed his attraction to the same sex. As the other boys were noticing girls, it wasn't the same for him. He was noticing guys differently. He felt like he just didn't fit in. One day in 8th grade he was riding on the school bus and had gotten on the bus before most of the other students. As he sat down, he saw something written on the seat in front of him. It said, "I know you're a fag." When he saw it, he panicked. He tried to cover it up and to scratch it out so that no one would see it. He said, "It was an eye-opening moment. I hadn't thought about it quite like that." For the first time he thought "maybe I'm gay."⁸

Understanding their past—confusion

Perhaps one of the biggest themes in the past of anyone who struggles with same-sex attraction is confusion. All of the men I interviewed mentioned this as a part of their past, particularly in their early teens, but even extending into their twenties. Especially for people who have grown up Christian, this discovery of same-sex attraction can be particularly troubling, as they know it's wrong. For many, and I assume even for those who would label themselves as openly gay, this journey of discovery has not been easy. It often involves feeling uncomfortable and unsure.

This inner confusion creates a lot of stress, not to mention that this confusion may be aggravated by outside factors like bullying, name-calling, and a general sense of not belonging. Nick shared this traumatic experience from his years at a Lutheran grade school:

⁸ "Oliver" Skype interview (audio recorded). 16 October 2015.

I was in 5th grade, and I sang a solo in church for Christmas. The next day I came to church, and the guys in the grades above me were just picking on me and saying “you sing like a girl” and “faggot” and mean stuff... And one day, those guys, they cornered me against the doorway, and they were spitting on me and kicking me and there were like 5 or 6 guys... I was just really confused about what was going on... and I remember as a kid, all I wanted to do was to live the way Jesus wanted me to live, and I just didn't understand why all this weird stuff was happening... so I got mad at God.⁹

Once again, I wish that Nick's experience were one-of-a-kind, but I'm certain it isn't. In my grade school years (1995-2004), I never physically bullied anyone for being gay, but I know we all used the terms “gay,” “homo,” “fag,” and “lesbian” to make fun of other people. We thought it was funny, but I'm sure that I hurt other people with my words.

Understanding their past—the silent taboo of homosexuality

Much of this sense of confusion and the feeling of being outcast is deeply connected to the individual's knowledge (or lack thereof) on the issue of homosexuality. For many, the only thing they knew about being attracted to the same sex is that it was weird and wrong. For others, they knew even less. Nowadays, because of the availability and accessibility of information through the internet, children are finding out about sex and sexuality at an earlier and earlier age. But this is not the case for everyone, and it certainly wasn't for Randy.

Randy is in his 60s and has been a Lutheran school teacher for over 20 years. Until a few months ago, the only people who knew about Randy's struggle with same-sex attraction were his wife and his Christian counselor. Yes, Randy is married, and he has a strong, loving relationship with his wife, but he still has to fight the temptations that come with being attracted to men. Randy grew up in an era much different than ours today. Randy told me about how he knew very little about sex during grade school. The sexual revolution was not yet in full swing, or at least it hadn't reached Randy yet. He says “I really never ever heard the word ‘sex.’ When we talked about anything sexual, it was always ‘sixth commandment issues.’”¹⁰

In church and at home, sex was a taboo topic. And this lack of education and openness made things difficult for Randy. He told me this embarrassing story from high school:

In 9th grade I remember them talking about sex. It was in health class, and I can remember telling them—and this must be absolutely unbelievable—but I can remember when they asked the question “Does anybody know where babies come from?” Well, I

⁹ “Nick” Skype Interview

¹⁰ “Randy” Phone Interview (audio recorded). 2 November 2015.

raised my hand really quickly, and I told him “Well...our pastor told us that when our moms are going to have a baby, God puts a little beat behind her heart, and naturally that’s where babies come from...I guess I believed it so much because...why would a pastor ever tell you anything wrong?”¹¹

In addition, Randy’s parents did little to further his understanding of sexuality and same-sex attraction. Randy remembers when he first asked someone about the idea of being attracted to the same sex. “I can remember asking a question once, and my mom said... ‘Well why would you ask a question like that?’ And so then right away, I got the sense that something was off...that you didn’t talk about that.”¹²

Another way parents and Christian leaders have failed is in their lack of compassion and care. Often parents and leaders feel awkward or uncertain about how to talk about sexuality, and so they avoid it. During his difficult grade school years, while Nick was being bullied, he felt like people knew there was something going on, but no one stepped in to help. He says, “No one ever took me aside and said ‘are you okay? What’s going on with you?’ It kind of seemed like [the attitude was] ‘sweep it under the rug.’ And everybody kinda knew, but they weren’t gonna say anything...Even my pastor at the time never even brought me aside and said ‘Are you okay? Is everything alright?’ They just kind of let it go.”¹³

I hope that these little stories help paint you a picture of what people struggle with in their formative years. There’s an excess of confusion and a lack of education. Many people, like Oliver and Nick, feel like everybody knows, and at the same time, nobody knows. Even for those who now affirm their homosexuality and are proud of it, their road was not easy.

It has not always been fun. It has not been exciting. For many it has involved bullying. For others it means the destruction and deterioration of important relationships. For most, if not all, it has been confusing. Many have resisted it, knowing it was wrong. They have tried to suppress it, only to see it surge back to the surface. Being attracted to the same sex certainly has not made life easier. If you are talking to people who struggle with same-sex attraction or consider themselves gay, it is safest to assume that they have had a more difficult life than you have. You need to assume that they have baggage that you don’t understand.

¹¹ “Randy” Phone Interview

¹² “Randy” Phone Interview

¹³ “Nick” Skype Interview

The silence of teachers, parents, pastors, and friends has caused great confusion and fear for those who struggle with same-sex attraction. Treating this subject as a taboo has not made it disappear into the shadows, but rather, has pushed those battling it into the shadows of isolation and confusion. Knowing the harmful effects of this silence will help us to be bold to speak about homosexuality and not treat it as a taboo any longer.

Understanding their past—homosexual relationships

Another big part of helping those who battle attraction to the same sex involves understanding the scars they have from previous relationships—namely romantic and sexual relationships with the same sex. Just as heterosexual people have emotional scars from their previous romantic relationships and tough breakups, so do those who have had relationships with people of the same sex.

Randy, Nick, and Oliver all had experiences with past homosexual relationships. Randy, even though he was married, had several different relationships with other men. When he got married, he thought that these thoughts and attractions had dissipated, but in his 5th or 6th year of marriage, while he was in his mid 20s, he joined the U.S. Army and got into a number of relationships with other men there. Eventually, after Randy left the Army, he went back to college to get his teaching degree and became a Christian grade school teacher. A few years into his ministry, when he was in his early 40s, he had a homosexual relationship with a member of his church. This relationship caused some serious wreckage in his life. Randy spoke at length about this relationship, and it was evident that it left him with some deep scars.

I finally broke it off because I couldn't stand it...by this time I had felt like the worst liar and cheat in the whole entire world. Everybody thought, "we were married all these years, what a wonderful marriage we had," and [it was all] lies and lies and lies...I couldn't live with my conscience. So that guy and I broke it off...I almost lost my call for that. Nobody really knew what the deal was, but it kept me away from my family. I almost lost my wife and kids... [and yet] it broke my heart to break up the person that I was with, because I was very very close to him... It took me a year to get over it, and I promised myself that I would never allow anyone that deep in my heart again.¹⁴

Perhaps not everyone you'll meet will have scars as deep as Randy does, but understanding previous relationships is essential to helping people through the healing process.

¹⁴ "Randy" Phone Interview.

Oliver also told me about a previous relationship he had. He went to a Christian grade school, high school, and college, but in his years in grad school, he was in an 8 month-long relationship with another guy. He was living with his parents at the time and had to hide it from them. He told me how the relationship weighed on his conscience, and how he knew it wasn't God-pleasing, but for a while, he found ways to rationalize it.¹⁵

Nick's previous relationships also left him with deep scars. As you may recall, Nick was living the homosexual lifestyle, going to gay bars, getting black-out drunk, and doing a variety of drugs. During this time, Nick was in several relationships, including one that was physically abusive. One night, his boyfriend was so violent that he was afraid for his life and thought he was going to die. He called the police, but when they arrived, they thought it was all a big joke. Nick also had a variety of sexual partners while deep into the gay party scene.

I had been so abused and I would say I've been raped a lot of times...I was so on drugs or blacked out that I didn't want stuff to happen, but I felt like "Alright, I might as well let this guy. I'd feel bad if I told him I was gonna leave"...It was so messed up...letting people do stuff to me...letting myself do stuff. I thought I would make them feel bad if I told them no. It's so messed up. It's sick, just how much the devil had me.¹⁶

In addition to dealing with the baggage of these previous romantic relationships and sexual encounters, Nick had to make some hard choices in his life of repentance. As God worked in his heart, he made the hard choice of cutting himself off from all of the gay friends and supporters he had gained while living the homosexual lifestyle. While cutting himself off from those friends wasn't Nick's only option, he found it was the only responsible way to handle the temptation and to distance himself from that destructive lifestyle. As a result, when Nick returned to church, he really didn't have any friends. To this day he is still trying to find close friends to fill that void.¹⁷

Helping and serving someone who is attracted to the same sex isn't just about the struggles they face right now or their outlook on the future. Their struggles may, in fact, be most deeply rooted in the scars left by relationship experiences from their past.

Understanding coming out.

Another key concept that we need to understand is the process of coming out. Coming out is a huge event in the life of anyone who is attracted to the same sex. The process of coming

¹⁵ "Oliver" Skype Interview.

¹⁶ "Nick" Skype Interview.

¹⁷ "Nick" Skype Interview.

out and telling another person about this same-sex attraction may be quite varied, depending on what the individual thinks about their homosexual attraction. Most often in our culture, when someone comes out, it means that they declare publicly that they are gay—and that they are okay with it. People are then encouraged to support them and celebrate them. For some Christians, however, coming out simply means telling someone else about their same-sex desires. For them, it doesn't mean celebrating their sin and their temptation, but it means being open for the first time about something that has always been a secret.

Regardless of whether this coming out is approached with pride or with concern, it takes time to get the confidence to come out. Rarely will someone come out at the first sign of homosexual attraction. In fact, in the cases of Nick, Randy, and Oliver, it took more than five years for them to tell somebody else about their attraction to the same sex. For Randy and Nick, in particular, it took more than 10 years. Why do people wait so long to tell somebody else about it? Well, once again this has a lot to do with internal confusion about their own feelings. Many, if not all, are afraid to come out. They're afraid because they don't know how people will react when they find out. Nick first experienced these fears when he was only five years old.

When I was five, I had an epileptic seizure when I was sleeping with [my parents]. So I went to the big hospital downtown for tests, and one day I had an EKG...they hooked stuff up to my head, and the only thing I remember was being so frightened that they were gonna read my mind and find out that I had a crush on that guy at school and that I liked boys. And I'm like 'my parents will never love me again. They'll hate me.'¹⁸

Many of these fears are simply caused by uncertainty. If parents haven't spoken to their children much about sexuality, and if the only message someone knows about homosexuality is “this is wrong,” then it's pretty natural to assume someone would be afraid of coming out.

When someone comes out, first impressions are very important. The first reaction they get to this news may shape the way they think about and perceive their own same-sex desires. For this reason, people choose very carefully the people they'll come out to. A positive experience can make all the difference. Nick told me about how he came out to his parents.

So I came out to them, and my dad said that it's wrong, and [that] it's not what God wants for your life, but [he said] “I'm going to love you no matter what.” At that time, I felt so comforted by that...and I started taking more of a look at what I was doing and I thought, “Now that they don't approve of it, but they still love me, I didn't really have

¹⁸ “Nick” Skype Interview.

anything to be afraid about, so why didn't I just tell them before?" I was afraid that they weren't gonna love me.¹⁹

Oliver's first experiences coming out were also quite positive. He didn't tell his parents first, though. In fact, they were some of the last people to find out. Oliver first told one of his closest friends. His friend sat and listened, and then offered the comfort that God still loved him. He also reminded him that God always hears his prayers. Next, Oliver told some of his closest friends in college. Their responses were also very encouraging. One of his friends said "I don't see you any differently. This doesn't change anything," while another told him, "This isn't a death sentence," and assured him that he was willing to talk about it anytime.²⁰

I also interviewed CJ, a recent college graduate, about his experience as a Christian battling same-sex attraction. CJ's experience with coming out was unique. CJ went to a Lutheran grade school and high school, and his dad is a pastor. He first recognized his same-sex attraction when he was 12, but was afraid to tell his parents. He says "I remember constantly thinking to myself 'I hope I'm not gay, but I'm afraid I am. The evidence supports it.' I responded pretty quickly by resolving never to embrace it, both because I knew it was sinful and because the culture I grew up in looked down on that lifestyle so passionately."²¹

The first thing that made CJ's coming out unique was that he first came out to someone he barely knew. He first spoke about his same-sex attraction to Scott Barefoot,²² whom he found through Facebook. Why was CJ willing to talk to someone he barely knew, but not to his own parents? Perhaps it's because he knew how Scott would react—unlike his parents. Or maybe it was because Scott had made it clear what he thought about homosexuality—unlike CJ's parents. The other thing that made CJ's coming out unique was that he didn't get to choose when he came out to his parents. A friend of CJ's called his parents because he was concerned that CJ was depressed. Not surprisingly, CJ was angry. Although the action was well-intentioned, it may not have been the best choice. Coming out is an incredibly personal, carefully chosen event, and forcing someone to come out or outing them is rarely, if ever, a good idea. CJ said that despite

¹⁹ "Nick" Skype Interview.

²⁰ "Oliver" Skype Interview.

²¹ "CJ" Skype Interview (audio recorded). 10 October 2015.

²² Scott Barefoot is a WELS Lutheran who lived the homosexual lifestyle for several years and eventually came back to the church. Scott now speaks at churches throughout the United States about his experience, trying to inform people about how to help people who struggle with same sex attraction. He also helps individuals who battle same-sex attraction and helps guys get in touch with others who are struggling with the same things. You can find out more about his ministry at www.poglutherans.org

the circumstances, his parents took the news pretty well. They weren't sure what to say except to assure him that they loved him. CJ's dad, a pastor, just asked a lot of questions and wanted to understand exactly what he was going through.

This idea of coming out, for many Christians, not only involves friends and family members, but also their pastors. CJ, Randy, Nick, and Oliver all talked about their experiences coming out to their pastors. This particular coming out can have a big impact on how people understand the connection between their same-sex attraction and their faith. Thankfully, all four had fairly positive experiences.

Randy only came out to his pastor recently. In fact, the first time I corresponded with him, he hadn't yet told his pastor. Randy was a little apprehensive about talking to his pastor because he didn't know what he was going to say. The pastor really hadn't talked about homosexuality much in his teaching or from the pulpit. Randy hadn't heard anything from the pastor that specifically scared him, but it was the pastor's silence on the issue that concerned him. The news came as a total surprise to Randy's pastor, since he had known Randy for a long time as they served together on the faculty of the church and school. He was supportive and assured Randy that he was available to talk whenever he needed.²³

A lot of guys, like Randy, are afraid of talking to their pastors because they don't know what they'll say. They're afraid that their pastors will kick them out of the church or shun them. There is also a certain degree of uncertainty, since they are coming out to someone new. CJ, on the other hand, felt pretty comfortable coming out to his pastor. CJ said that there was something about the way the pastor talked and preached that made him feel very comfortable about breaking the news to him. He could tell that this pastor was both intelligent and easygoing. His pastor didn't treat the news like it was doomsday or the worst thing in the world. Instead, the pastor reminded him of grace—that because of Jesus, God doesn't see his sin anymore. God doesn't see him as gay, but as his perfect child.²⁴

Nick's experience with coming out to his pastor was a bit lukewarm. Soon after Nick came back to church, he told his pastor everything, and he felt very relieved to have someone he could talk to. His pastor encouraged him to email him whenever he found it help. Nick also mentioned several sermons that his pastor preached that especially hit home with him, and

²³ "Randy" Phone Interview

²⁴ "CJ" Skype Interview.

helped him in his struggle. But Nick's relationship with his pastor was far from perfect. Sometimes Nick would share something with the pastor that he was really excited about, and as he spoke, not everything that Nick said was always doctrinally sound.²⁵ So, when his pastor saw those red flags of false doctrine go up, he would try to guide Nick away from those kinds of statements. However, Nick didn't always receive that guidance in the gentle way his pastor intended it. To him, it felt like the pastor could never fully rejoice with him in his successes. He felt like for every thing he accomplished, the pastor would say something that dampened his excitement.

This might be an appropriate place for a word of caution to pastors. I notice myself doing this as well, but we have to be careful not to let our desire to "teach, rebuke, correct, and train" (2 Timothy 3:16) keep us from rejoicing in the little victories that people have. There is a place for celebrating growth in faith and in sanctification, even if those things are yet partial or incomplete.

Oliver came out to his pastor his junior year in college, and his pastor was very helpful. In fact, he didn't act surprised at all. He met weekly with Oliver to talk, read Bible passages and pray. Oliver's pastor not only comforted him, but continually supported him in his spiritual battle.

Coming out is a key event in the life of someone who is attracted to the same sex. It often takes years before someone is willing to share this with someone else. For advice on what to do if someone comes out to you, see the section entitled "Ask questions and listen" later in this paper.

Understanding their spiritual struggle

Every Christian faces spiritual battles. For some, it's the battle against greed and materialism. For others, it's a battle against drug addiction. Some Christians face persistent doubt about what God's Word says, while still others daily fight against the sins of lust and pornography use. A big part of understanding people who are struggling with same-sex attraction means understanding the spiritual battles they fight. These battles come in various forms. They are not fought and won in a day or even in a year. For many people attracted to the same sex,

²⁵ When Nick spoke about his turnaround from the gay lifestyle, he insinuated that the Holy Spirit suddenly worked in him apart from God's Word.

these are battles that need to be fought daily. So what does the spiritual battle of a same-sex-attracted person look like?

Understanding their spiritual struggle—their beliefs

One of the primary battles many people face is more intellectual in nature. It is a battle of faith and of what to believe about God, his Word, and same-sex-attracted individuals. When a Christian realizes that he is attracted to the same sex, what is the difficulty he's going to face intellectually? A person who is attracted to the same sex is going to have to reconcile several different thoughts. First of all, there are questions like "Why am I more attracted to the same sex than to the opposite sex? Why does it feel so natural? Could something that feels so natural really be wrong? They must reconcile these questions with what God says about homosexuality—that in all circumstances it is sinful and unacceptable.

Some have chosen to reconcile these differences by ignoring or downplaying the Bible's statements about homosexuality. Instead, they might say, "God made me this way, so God wants me to be happy" or "God wants us to love and have companionship. God certainly wouldn't tell me that I can't love someone the way that feels natural for me." This is a dangerous way to deal with these seemingly contradictory thoughts, as it directly opposes God's Word and assumes things that God doesn't actually say.

Even for people who have grown up in the church all their lives and have heard the correct teaching about homosexuality, this can be a struggle. Put yourself in the shoes of someone who struggles with same-sex attraction. You know that if you believe what you've always been taught, that means that the expression of the natural attractions you feel is wrong. It means that you can't have a romantic relationship with someone in the way that feels very normal for you. Can you imagine how infectious this thought might be: "What if my church is wrong?" And so you decide to research more about it online, and you find lots of churches and lots of pastors and lots of theologians that say that homosexuality is okay and—if people are loving, committed, and faithful—it's even God-pleasing. Could you see how that would be tempting?

Continuing to believe what they've been taught and believing what the Bible says about homosexuality means that their future looks pretty tough—maybe even hopeless. On the other hand, the LGBT community and many gay-affirming churches will accept them for who they are. Which of the two is perceived as more loving? The LGBT community or the church?

Undoubtedly joining the LGBT community would seem like the easier road to take. Nick shared some of his thoughts with me about this particular struggle. He said,

I struggled with that too for some time, like, “Do I want to be happy or do I want to fight against myself every day?” Honestly it was hard. It was one of the toughest things that somebody will every have to do in their life...It’s like there were times when [I thought] “How could I tell anyone to do this, when this is what it’s like. This is impossible. I don’t even know if I can do this.”

While for some people it may seem easy to dismiss biblical and non-biblical arguments for the acceptance of homosexuality, for Christians who battle same-sex attractive, it can be a pervasive and persuasive idea.

For this reason, it’s incredibly important for Christians to share the awesome, unique news of the gospel with those fighting this battle. The good news of full and free forgiveness in Jesus and of the constant love of God is the one thing that will set the message of the Bible apart from other teachings of love and acceptance.

Understanding their spiritual struggle—was this their choice?

There’s one overwhelming piece of evidence that has helped me understand the personal, difficult nature of this struggle more than anything. It may be too simple, but it’s pivotal: this is not a choice. I don’t mean for this to be an excuse for anyone to indulge in homosexual sin, or to think that they’re not responsible for their actions, but it’s important for us to recognize how it must feel for someone to face this kind of temptation. Just imagine that tomorrow, you suddenly started feeling attracted to the same sex. Despite your attempts to resist it, the temptation increased. You hadn’t invited this temptation in. Why is this happening to you? Why do you have to face this temptation and others don’t? How frustrating would that be? How much would you be tempted to despair? I can’t begin to imagine what that’s really like, and yet that’s the frustration many same-sex-attracted Christians face. For many Christians who battle same-sex attraction, this temptation showed up in their life without them seeking it out.

We can’t pretend that we fully understand what they are going through, but perhaps the closest comparison we can make is to say that it’s a bit like many of the unique temptations we all face. Some people struggle with the temptation to greed or arrogance or lust. Others are prone to envy or anger. Did we “choose” these? Not really. Does that make us any less accountable? Certainly not. But it does help us have a little empathy for the struggles of other sinners. Can you imagine how frustrating it would be if someone told you to simply stop being tempted the way

that you're tempted? What would it feel like to be bullied, made fun of, and treated like an outcast because you face a temptation others don't face? It doesn't seem fair.

There are many Christians like Nick, Randy, CJ, and Oliver, who would tell you that if they could choose, they would choose today to become heterosexual. They have even prayed for such a transformation, but it has never happened. Randy shared his frustrations with me: "Y'know you wonder sometimes why it's you. Why you. I'll be honest with you. I probably could say it a million times, 'All I ever wanted was just to be a normal straight...All-American guy, and I never really ever really felt like that.'"²⁶ Perhaps you remember Nick's story where he would cry himself to sleep at night, praying that he would wake up and be different.²⁷ How many more stories are there like these? How many others feel torn apart because they face the same temptations over and over again?

Author T.J. O'Brien described his own same-sex attraction this way: "Like so many others in my situation, at no time do I recall making a conscious choice about my sexual orientation—where would I have even learned of such an option? If I had had a choice, it would have been, 'No.' Why would I deliberately choose something that would isolate me and inflict so much pain, confusion, and feelings of rejection?"²⁸

Finally, we're all born sinful. As King David said in Psalm 51:5, "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." We have a sinful nature that drags us down every day. Just because we may have a propensity to a specific sin does not make that sin any more excusable. While I may have to fight temptations to arrogance, pride, and lust, somebody like Oliver has to battle the temptation to homosexuality. I am no better than him just because I'm not tempted by homosexuality. We both have to struggle against our sin with the help of the Holy Spirit. I hope the understanding of this key truth makes us a bit more compassionate towards those who struggle with a temptation we don't have to battle.

²⁶ "Randy" Phone Interview.

²⁷ "Nick" Skype Interview.

²⁸ T.J. O'Brien. "You Are Not Alone: A Plea for Understanding the Homosexual Condition." *Dialogue*. 26 no.3 (1993): 131.

T.J. O'Brien is a man who has same-sex attraction and is an LDS member. He does a good job articulating what it's like to have same-sex attraction and to try to reconcile that with religious beliefs that condemn homosexuality.

Understanding their spiritual struggle—identity

Perhaps you have already noticed that throughout this paper, I have often used phrases like “people who struggle with same-sex attraction” or “Christians who battle same-sex attraction” instead of calling these individuals “gay,” “lesbian,” or “homosexual.” The terms “homosexual” and “gay” have a lot to do with identity. When people call themselves “gay” or “homosexual,” they are often making a statement about who they are—a statement about their identity. It partially means they find their identity in their sexuality. It means that being attracted to the same sex is simply who they are.

Christians who are battling same-sex attraction face the constant push to make that attraction a part of their identity and to embrace it. The LGBT community wants people to be proud of calling themselves “gay” or “lesbian.” God doesn’t. He wants us to find our identity in him.

That being said, if a man is attracted to other men, it’s not inaccurate for him to say “I think I’m gay.” However, I would hope that Christians don’t identify with their sin, but rather with their identity in Christ. In the same way, I would not encourage people who struggle with an addiction to porn to say “I’m a porn addict,” but rather “I struggle with an addiction to pornography.” And so, I would encourage those who struggle with same-sex attraction not to call themselves “gay” or “homosexual.”

In the discussion of homosexuality, identity is key. Questions like “Who am I?” or “What makes me *me*?” are questions that we all ask ourselves. These questions are even more pivotal in the lives of those who are dealing with homosexual attraction. Christians shouldn’t resign themselves to being defined by their sin, or even being defined by their sexual orientation. I am a heterosexual male, but when people want to really know who I am, that’s not one of the first things I mention. Nor would I say that my identity is that I struggle with pride and lust. Sure, it’s important for Christians to identify their battles, and to know what they struggle with, but I would rather have Christians identify as “saints” or as children of God before labeling themselves as homosexuals.

This issue of terminology in identity isn’t just a matter of preference. Throughout the New Testament, the Apostle Paul refers to Christians not by their sin, but as those “loved by God” (Romans 1:7), “God’s holy people” (Ephesians 1:1, Philippians 1:1, Colossians 1:1), and “called to be his holy people” (Romans 1:7, 1 Corinthians 1:2). He doesn’t talk down to them,

but calls them “brothers and sisters” (1 Corinthians 1:10, 2 Corinthians 8:1, 2 Corinthians 13:1, Galatians 1:2, and many more places). This is how Paul addresses Christians. He wants them to know their identity in Christ first. To be sure, he will call them out for their sins, but he does not say “to the adulterers in Colossae” or “to the drunkards and the violent people in Rome.”

There may be many Christians who struggle with their attraction to the same sex and still use the terms “gay,” “lesbian,” or “homosexual” to refer to themselves. I don’t intend to criticize those that still utilize such terms, and I’m not insinuating that they are challenging their identity in Christ. In fact, I’ve talked to a handful of Christians who struggle with their attraction to the same sex, and they still called themselves “gay.” However, my encouragement is simple: your sin is not your identity. Don’t make your sin your defining characteristic. You are more than an addict. You are more than a gossip. You are more than gay. You are a Christian. You are a saint.

As I spoke with CJ, I was surprised by his mature take on the matter. He told me about how he grew in his understanding of God’s Word and of the gospel through his struggle, and he said this about the issue of identity:

I learned a lot about identity. If I listen to culture, my identity is ‘I’m gay, I kind of fit into this lifestyle, and I’m not going to be happy until I acknowledge that.’ But that’s not my identity. First and foremost, I’m a child of God. I’m redeemed. God doesn’t see me as gay...when God looks at me he doesn’t see a homosexual or a sinner in any way, he just sees his child, unblemished and without defect.²⁹

It’s my hope that any Christian struggling with same-sex attraction would have this same perspective on their Christian identity.

Understanding their spiritual struggle—temptation

On top of this intellectual struggle is the battle Christians fight against temptation. It’s one thing to notice that someone is attractive, but the real struggle is resisting the temptation to let that attractiveness turn into sinful thoughts and actions. It could be as simple as thinking about a guy you see in the grocery store, or lingering too long on a picture or an ad on the internet. Randy talked a bit about this difficulty.

It is impossible not to notice attractive men (or women as the case may be) throughout the day. We live in a world full of people, and avoiding all people altogether is the only way to avoid not looking upon another person lustfully, and that’s not a healthy option...This is distressing because I notice that I *notice* and make that second glance all the time.³⁰

²⁹ “CJ” Skype Interview.

³⁰ “Oliver” Email Interview.

Even for somebody like Randy, who has fought this temptation his whole life, he still has to do battle every day. He says, “I have at times been attracted to somebody, but I’ve just learned to turn around and go the other way and pray. And although there have been many times where I’ve been tempted to say something or talk to somebody or pursue it, I really worked hard with God’s help to [know] that he’s got me in his hand.”³¹

When it comes to sexual temptations, porn plays a huge role in the spiritual struggle of those attracted to the same-sex. For many, porn and masturbation are the first sexual outlets for their same-sex desire. It might take a lot of bravery and boldness to actually go out in public and have a relationship with another guy, and even more to have sex with that person, but porn is so much easier. There’s little risk of someone finding out, and it’s easy to access. The thing that makes porn so dangerous is that it’s not just a symptom of same-sex desire, but it’s an action that makes the struggle that much harder. Porn use reinforces these same-sex desires and ties them to physical pleasure, making the desires stronger as a result.

Porn use also adds to the guilt that people face as Christians attracted to the same sex. These Christians already tend to face plenty of guilt, but porn use affects self-confidence and one’s Christian self-image. CJ told me about his battle with porn and the way it ate at him. I think his description here does a good job of summarizing how porn affects a Christian’s confidence to fight temptation.

That guilt [I felt] afterwards had the added kick of “Well, ok, you just sinned. You just disobeyed God knowingly, consciously. But you are also... supposed to be fighting this, and [you] just made it worse.” it sometimes led me to think “I might actually be completely irreparably broken...because I’m gay. And it’s only getting worse because of porn. I think it really also eats away at your self-confidence and your own belief that you can control what you do...like your self-control...It kinda sparks that idea that I can’t control what I’m doing, or that my sin is greater than grace—that I just don’t have enough self-control to try to follow God’s will. And that idea is just poisonous—the thought that I can’t stop it.”³²

Understanding their spiritual struggle—their outlook on the future

It’s quite clear that temptation plays a huge role in the spiritual struggle of a Christian attracted to the same sex, but if we reduce the struggle that many face to simply a battle against temptation and false teaching, we have missed the mark. A large part of the spiritual life of a

³¹ “Randy” Phone Interview.

³² “CJ” Skype Interview

person battling same-sex attraction involves their outlook on the future. The first question many guys ask about their homosexual attraction is “Will I have to struggle with this my whole life?” And the answer to that is uncertain. Nearly all the evidence and experiences I’ve encountered have been with people who have had to battle these temptations for the rest of their lives.

For a while, there was a big push to help people attracted to the same sex become heterosexual. A variety of organizations, such as Exodus International, provided therapy to homosexuals to try to discourage their same-sex attraction and encourage attraction to the opposite gender. Although Exodus International and other organizations have claimed success in the past, they have found that their “successes” didn’t last. “The ‘cure,’ many later admitted, was more of a ‘suppression’ that they learned to live with for years. And in each case, despite sincere and honest efforts to make the marriages work, same-sex feelings eventually surfaced, leaving families torn apart and emotionally scarred. Most of the marriages ended in divorce.”³³

Two of the male founders of Exodus International eventually left the organization and got married to each other.³⁴ The organization recently closed and has been widely recognized as a failure. Though sexual orientation has been known to change for some, it isn’t very common. This means that a person who struggles with same-sex attraction may battle that temptation his whole life.

Is that really fair to ask of people—to tell them they’ll have to fight this their whole lives? Just think of what that means for the future of a man who is attracted to other men. If a Christian man is attracted to other men, and God tells him in the Bible that any romantic or sexual expression of this attraction is sinful, then what does that say about his future? It means that if he wants to have a meaningful, intimate relationship with someone he is attracted to, that is forbidden. In fact, it means that he will need to be careful about all same-sex relationships that he has, so that he won’t put himself in the way of temptation. In short, he will be resigned to a life of celibacy.

Some groups of Bible-believing Christians who affirm homosexuality will point to this as a reason that the Bible’s message about homosexuality can’t be right. They will say that a call to a life of celibacy is asking people to do something they don’t have the capacity for. Matthew Vines uses this argument as a big part of his reasoning in *God and the Gay Christian*. He has a

³³ O’Brien, 123

³⁴ O’Brien, 123

lot of experience dealing with gay Christians and their spiritual struggles. As a result, much of what he says is a reaction to the fact that people have tried to live celibate lifestyle and have found it unbearable.³⁵

But is that a good enough reason to reject celibacy? Just because it's hard? Should Christians give into temptations that are very difficult to resist? Should Christians give up because they might have to face difficulty for the rest of their lives? Absolutely not. The Apostle Paul himself talks about his own struggle with a difficulty that wouldn't go away. We don't know exactly what his "thorn in the side" was, but we see in 2 Corinthians 12:7b-10 that even though Paul prayed, God didn't take away this difficulty.

Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

As far as we know, Paul had to deal with that thorn in the flesh for the rest of his life. Do you think he ever got discouraged? Do you think he ever wondered why God never took this thorn away? Absolutely. And God's purpose in not removing the thorn wasn't to make life easier for Paul, but to make sure that he was always focused on Christ, and that he might see God's strength even in the face of his own weaknesses and struggles.

This idea of a life of celibacy is not an easy pill to swallow. Any Christian who is going to encourage another Christian to a life of celibacy needs to understand what exactly they are demanding of that person. In fact, anyone who encourages a celibate life should be prepared to walk with them and bear their burdens—it will be a difficult road. Nick shared with me his frustrations about the idea of lifelong celibacy. Nick still has hope that God will take away this same-sex attraction. He understands that God may not take it away, but he doesn't want to resign himself to this future.

If you're gonna say that we're sexual beings, and that I'm not allowed to—that I have to be celibate...I think that's what a lot of guys don't understand is that that's what they're asking. To have those feelings of walking with somebody, and just even holding hands or something...that feeling of happiness...those emotional feelings. It's not just about the sex sometimes. It's more about the companionship.... I'm putting my trust in the

³⁵ Matthew Vines. *God and the Gay Christian*. New York: Convergent Books, 2014. 41.

Lord, and with what he's done for me so far, I don't think I'm going to limit anything for my life. That's like taking my hope and crushing it—saying there is no hope when there always is hope for anything.

Each of my interviewees had a slightly different view on marriage. Nick's hope for marriage is reflected above. Obviously Randy is already married, so his situation is unique. He got married before he realized how prevalent his same-sex attractions were, and so he chose to stay committed to the relationship in which he had vowed to remain.³⁶ Oliver seemed pretty convinced that marriage isn't for him, and it seemed as though he had come to terms with that.³⁷ CJ wasn't willing to completely rule out the idea of marriage, though he thought it was pretty unlikely.

Looking at marriage. I certainly don't think it's impossible. It's certainly possible, because [with God] everything is, but I think my stance right now is "It's going to take a very special woman." And it's going to have to be very very gospel-centered, and there's going to have to be a ton of intentionality about "this is a marriage, and we're gonna do it like God intended it to be. We're going to be supportive and be a model of Christ and the church."³⁸

Though some people who are attracted to the same sex express hope about developing heterosexual attractions or getting married, in the majority of cases, these are not realistic solutions or expectations. Suggesting marriage or encouraging the development of heterosexual attraction is dangerous because it sets the expectations very high for a Christian who battles same-sex attraction.

Understanding those who battle same-sex attraction.

As someone who doesn't struggle with same-sex attraction, I don't know if I can ever truly understand what guys like Randy, Nick, CJ, and Oliver have to deal with. There are some very deep issues at play that present unique spiritual struggles and unique life paths. This attempt to understand, however, is still the most important step. Without first seeking to understand, we will cripple our own attempts to minister to these people. We will be unaware of certain pitfalls and we will be oblivious to unique avenues for the gospel. If we don't listen and try to understand what someone is going through, we may have a tough time earning an audience with

³⁶ Interview with "Randy"

³⁷ Interview with "Oliver"

³⁸ "CJ" Skype Interview.

them, and an even more difficult time getting our message across. As Steven Covey says, “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.”³⁹

PART THREE

Ministering to those who struggle with same-sex attraction in ten not-so-easy steps.

The following portion of this paper will focus on the application of the truths discovered so far. All of the following principles are based on understanding—an understanding of what God’s Word says about homosexuality and an understanding of the particular struggles that are common to those struggling with same-sex attraction. The first six points focus on creating a compassionate, loving atmosphere within our churches for those who struggle with same-sex attraction. The last four points focus more on how to minister directly to those battling same-sex attraction

1. No taboos

As I mentioned in the introduction, one of the big problems we face is that the topic of homosexuality and sexuality in general is treated as a taboo. Pastors will sometimes beat around the bush instead of talking directly about sexuality. Many avoid opportunities to talk about homosexuality and other sexual issues because they are afraid it will distract people or make people uncomfortable. However, our silence on the issue makes people uncomfortable as well. Randy explained his experience to me: “It’s treated with a silence that makes you feel like ‘if you have that problem, you must be really awful’ . . .if the pastor doesn’t—can’t talk about that sin, but boy, he can sure talk about this sin . . .then it must be really bad.”⁴⁰ Randy also said that his apprehension to coming out to his pastor was influenced by the fact that his pastor rarely ever addressed the sin of homosexuality.

It is important for all pastors to be comfortable addressing the sin and the struggle of homosexuality. People need to hear about it in sermons. They need to hear that it’s something people legitimately struggle with, and that it is possible to be a Christian and battle this temptation. They need to hear about the grace of God that removes all sins—even sins of homosexuality. This message of forgiveness is especially important, not only for the same-sex struggler, but also for those who are misinformed, bigoted, or lack compassion for those who

³⁹Steven Covey *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989. 247.

⁴⁰“Randy” Phone Interview.

struggle with same-sex attraction. In Bible class (and perhaps especially in a beginner Bible class), it's important to educate people about homosexuality and help them understand what the Bible says about it as well as the spiritual and emotional struggles of those who face it.

Some people might say "Why are we spending so much time on this? There aren't any gay people in our church." They might be right that there are no gay people in their church. Perhaps it's because they've all been discouraged from attending. Statistics, however, tell us a different story. Some pretty comprehensive studies⁴¹ say that 3.8% of the population identifies as gay or lesbian. If those studies are accurate, that is good enough reason to be concerned about this and to be prepared (after all, Jesus was willing to go after just 1% of the flock). However, I'm convinced that there are an even greater percentage of people who are silent strugglers. They might not call themselves "gay" on a survey, but they have an attraction to the same sex that they don't understand or that they're afraid of telling anyone about. Those people need our help. We cannot continue to ignore them. We owe it to our people to speak about it. If God doesn't shy away from talking about homosexuality and sexuality in the Bible, neither should we.

2. Treat it like any other sin

Another huge issue we face as we look at ministering to those who battle same-sex attraction is that Christians haven't always addressed the sin of homosexuality in a way that is faithful to God's Word. In the first part of this paper, I talked about how same-sex attraction is addressed when it shows up in the Bible. It is no more damnable than another sin, and no less forgivable either. Don't treat people who struggle with this sin as patients with a chronic disease, but as people who have a particular sin they struggle with.

So what does this look like? Well, ideally, it would be great if pastors could mention homosexuality right alongside other sins in a sermon. Let's say a pastor is talking about a list of ways in which selfishness manifests itself in the life of a Christian. The pastor wants to mention a variety of different sins so that he applies this to all of his hearers. Take this sample sermon excerpt, for example:

Our own selfishness is the cause of so many sinful behaviors and attitudes. We selfishly gossip about others and put them down. We are selfish with our money and possessions, and become greedy. We selfishly indulge our sexuality in ways that aren't God-pleasing,

⁴¹ Frank Newport. "Americans Greatly Overestimate Percent Gay, Lesbian in U.S." Gallup Poll. May 21, 2015 <http://www.gallup.com/poll/183383/americans-greatly-overestimate-percent-gay-lesbian.aspx>

like having lustful thoughts toward the same sex or looking at porn. This same selfishness causes us to disobey our parents and disrespect those in authority.

Some might respond, however, that this could be very distracting, and that all the people in church would be thinking about what the pastor said about homosexuality instead of the point of the rest of the sermon. I think that criticism is fair, and yet at the same time, as CJ told me, “Yeah, but you’ve gotta start somewhere.”⁴² I think he’s right. At some point, a pastor needs to bite the bullet and start talking about it, even if people are going to react strangely.

If he doesn’t feel he can just drop this sin into the middle of a sermon like that, perhaps he should consider doing a sermon or a sermon series on homosexuality. It would certainly be needed, and likely appreciated. Another idea for addressing the struggle against homosexuality would be to use a personal story in a sermon, highlighting God’s grace in the life of a person who struggles with same-sex attraction.

However a pastor chooses to do it, the purpose is key: to inform people about homosexuality in a way that is accurate and helpful, and not to avoid it. Apply God’s word in a way that helps the homosexual struggler and equips the heterosexual Christian to be more compassionate.

3. Right your wrongs

As a pastor begins to address homosexuality in his public ministry, and as individual Christians have conversations about homosexuality, humility and repentance are imperative. If we’re honest with ourselves, none of us have always treated homosexuality the way God would like. We have said things that are hurtful, or did things that encourage a culture of hate and judgment. Apologize for your previous sins and offenses. Make it clear to others that you have not always handled this in a God-pleasing way. Hopefully this will encourage them to have a similar, repentant attitude.

Whether those who are attracted to the same sex are proud of their sin or not, they have often been hurt by the church or the message that the church has preached. Sometimes it’s helpful to apologize, not only for yourself, but for all other Christians who have mistreated homosexuals in the name of God. Humility, honesty, and the willingness to admit you were wrong go a long way.

⁴² “CJ” Skype Interview.

4. Watch your behavior

If a pastor wants to effectively minister to those who struggle with same-sex attraction, and if any Christian wants to be able to help someone who struggles with this, his behavior matters. The way he carries himself and the way he speaks makes an impression on those around him. Actions speak louder than words. Your actions can either reinforce what you say in the pulpit and the classroom, or they can nullify the good things you have said. People don't often take the advice of hypocrites.

This means avoiding phrases like “that’s gay.” It means resolving not to make any jokes at the expense of gay people or to do any sort of impression with a “gay lisp”. It also means that you don't condone or tolerate this behavior among your friends and coworkers. It means that when you're at a coffee shop or at the grocery store, you go out of your way to talk to the woman whom you suspect might be a lesbian. It means that when you find out that your coworker is gay, you don't draw back, but you do your best to maintain a relationship with him and to treat him no differently than anyone else.

The Apostle Paul urges Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:12 to “set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity.” A few verses later, in 1 Timothy 4:16, he tells him, “Watch your life and your doctrine closely.” The way a pastor lives out his faith and reflects the truths of God's Word in his actions has a big impact on those inside and outside of his church. CJ knew, within a couple of Sundays of arriving at a new church, that he could speak to this pastor about his same-sex attraction without fear or apprehension. CJ could tell by the pastor's personality and the way he intelligently handled God's Word that he could approach him with confidence.⁴³

5. Make your compassion overtly clear.

Whether or not it's justified, the church has not made a great name for itself when it comes to being kind and compassionate towards those attracted to the same sex. CJ, born into a WELS family, hinted at this in his interview. He said, “The culture I grew up in looked down on that lifestyle so passionately.”⁴⁴ If our churches have that reputation—a reputation of being passionate about looking down on homosexuality—then pastors and Christians in the WELS

⁴³ “CJ” Skype Interview

⁴⁴ “CJ” Skype Interview

have a hole that we need to dig ourselves out of. We have an image problem. Randy shared similar thoughts. “The WELS out there gets quite a name...it doesn’t take much to read...right now the WELS pretty much has got this persona, that we are not loving and forgiving.”⁴⁵

If we assume that our way of being “loving” and “forgiving” is just to tell them the truth of God’s Word about their sin, we are falling short. We need to go out of our way to make our compassion and our love overtly clear. We need to make it clear that this “persona” we have is not who we are, and it is not the message God wants to convey. It will do little good to try to justify our past mistakes under the banner of “truth.” Instead, in humility we recognize that we have been less than compassionate in the past. Our humility and our overt compassion as pastors and as Christians may make the difference for someone who is fighting this internal battle with same-sex attraction.

6. Raise & train compassionate people.

Parents, pastors, teachers, and spiritual leaders in the church need to think about how they address homosexuality with those they teach and lead. This means taking the time to talk about a difficult, sometimes uncomfortable topic. When your students, children, or members ask questions about homosexuality, it means avoiding the easy answers. It means taking those teachable moments and using them to help people come to a compassionate understanding of those who struggle with same-sex attraction.

Perhaps one of the biggest difficulties in doing this is that we often lack compassion for the sins we don’t struggle with. The initial reaction of some to the sin of homosexuality is disgust and confusion. I have never spoken to a pedophile about his sin, but I’m sure I would have a very hard time showing him compassion. I have never struggled with that sin, and, to me, it’s disgusting. Should that keep me from being compassionate? No. In the same way, many find it difficult to have compassion for those who struggle with same-sex attraction, because they could never see themselves struggling with it. It will take teachers and leaders who themselves are compassionate to instill this unique compassion in other Christians.

7. Ask questions and listen.

As I mentioned earlier, a big part of the emotional and spiritual struggle for a Christian with same-sex attraction is coming out. If someone is willing to come out to you and confess

⁴⁵ “Randy” Phone Interview

their same-sex attraction, you will want to be prepared to react in a way that will help them and foster a good relationship for the future. A big part of doing that involves asking questions and listening. Show them you care about what they've been through by trying to understand their past and what they've faced. Show them you care about their present struggle by asking what sort of things are going on in their life that make this especially difficult. Ask them what spiritual battles they're fighting right now. And then be a good listener. Show compassion on your face and in your responses. Thank them for being willing to talk to you. Instead of withdrawing because of their coming out, use it as a reason to draw closer. Tell them that you still love them, and that God does too. Assure them of the fullness of God's grace and forgiveness for their sins.

Don't try to fix things right away. Resist this urge. You will get a chance to help them learn and grow, but this first coming out is about fostering a good relationship and showing compassionate care. Ask questions and try to learn more—not just because it will make them feel better, but because knowing more will help you minister better. Understanding will help you reach that person and many more.

We don't need more Christians who approach this issue thinking they already get it. If you've ever read about homosexuality online, you'll find plenty of people who think they get it and will speak from a stance of absolute truth. There are both Christians and LGBT advocates who will claim they know what's wrong with your view without ever trying to understand you, your experience, or the reasoning behind your opinions. There are already plenty of people who will speak without taking the time to ask questions and understand. We don't need more people who are quick to speak. We need more people who are willing to learn and to ask questions.

8. Use the Word.

Maybe it seems obvious, but as a pastor or as a Christian, making sure that your message consistently comes from God's Word is absolutely necessary. Believe it or not, people still have a high respect for God's Word. If you give them advice that's framed as your own opinion, you give them a chance to disagree with what appears to be a human opinion. However, if you share with them what God says, when they choose to argue, they'll find themselves arguing with God, not with you. With all the opinions and views on homosexuality, it's important to make sure people know that this message is from God, and not just from the church or the pastor or the culture.

There are a lot of great places you could take them to in the Bible. CJ told me about his favorite. He was talking to me about 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, where homosexuality is condemned, and he said “and then the next verse is one of the greatest things ever: ‘And that is what some of you were, but now you’ve been washed’ (1 Corinthians 6:11).⁴⁶ This verse is especially appropriate because the specific law condemnation of homosexuality is directly followed by a specific gospel proclamation for all those who have fallen into those sins. The passage points out the sin, but then refocuses the believer on what’s most important—that all those sins have been washed away.

Pastors and individual Christians who want to help their brothers and sisters with their battle against same-sex attraction need to encourage them to be in the Word. When Oliver got into his 8-month same-sex relationship, it was during a time when he had gotten out of the habit of reading the Bible. He later told me about one of the best things his pastor did with him: they met and read the Bible together.⁴⁷ In counseling sessions and personal interactions, it’s great to share God’s Word, but it’s also important to equip the believer to be in the Word on his own. For Nick, this meant reading a daily devotion in his car every day before work.⁴⁸ There are various ways of encouraging personal Bible study, but the encouragement is clear: get them into the Word!

9. Be patient.

Helping someone battle their same-sex desires will not be easy. As already mentioned, this may be a lifelong struggle. There may be a lot of past scars and heavy baggage that need to be dealt with before this person can move forward. As a pastor or a Christian friend, you must be patient. It may be months or even years before you see big changes in that person’s life. Be prepared for the long haul. O’Brien offers this instruction to those looking ahead to this long battle:

The problem is not that peaceful solutions to homosexual struggles are unattainable but that the untrained soldier has rushed into battle with the misconception that one skirmish will end the war. But most wars are fought over time with the successes and failures of many battles supported by wise and experienced counsel.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ “CJ” Skype Interview.

⁴⁷ “Oliver” Skype Interview.

⁴⁸ “Nick” Skype Interview.

⁴⁹ O’Brien, 122.

Just as all Christians are at the same time sinner and saint, it's important for us to recognize that the same is true of those battling same-sex attraction. Just because they know what the Bible says doesn't mean they will never go to a gay bar, or that they will never again look at gay porn. It doesn't mean that they won't be tempted to get into a relationship with another guy. I know it doesn't sound like a very positive thing to say, but it's important to expect lapses. In our ongoing battles with temptation, we often fall back into some of the same old sins again and again, and it's no different for them. Understand that they too may fail to resist temptation and fall back into their pet sins.

Another part of being patient means taking things at the individual's pace. CJ was frustrated by a friend of his who kept checking up on him frequently. He said it made him feel like a critical hospital patient who might drop off at any moment.⁵⁰ CJ made it clear with his parents and his pastor that he was in good control of his same-sex attraction and that he would come to them whenever he was struggling. CJ appreciated how his parents and his pastor respected what he said and didn't constantly bother him about it. In contrast, Nick wanted quite a bit more contact and care. After leaving the gay lifestyle, Nick didn't have many friends left. After he shared the news of his same-sex attraction with his pastor, he found him to be a friend he could trust. Nick emailed his pastor almost every day. Each case will be unique, so it's important not only to be patient, but to be flexible and to make yourself available. That way, when someone is struggling, they have no fear in coming to talk to you.

Finally, be ready to celebrate the little victories along the way. Rejoice with them when they successfully fight off temptation. Show your excitement and joy for them when they share with you a Bible passage that has helped them in their journey. Perhaps this Swedish proverb sums it up well: "Shared joy is a double joy; shared sorrow is half a sorrow."

10. Seek help.

Both Nick and Randy spoke of how much benefit they received from going to professional counseling. Nick even thought that counseling should be mandatory for a Christian who struggles with same-sex attraction. As a pastor or an individual Christian, there may be psychological and emotional issues beyond your level of expertise. For this reason, it may be wise to refer the individual to professional counseling. This doesn't mean that you stop meeting

⁵⁰ "CJ" Email Interview.

with them, or that you stop caring for them and counseling them, but it means that you recognize that there are issues at play that are best handled by a professional counselor.

In addition to counseling, some found it helpful to be able to talk to other Christians who are struggling with same-sex attraction, though opinions on this were mixed. Scott Barefoot helps put Christians with same-sex attraction in contact with others who have a similar struggle so that they can help each other fight their battles. Nick wasn't very keen on the idea. He tried it for a while, but felt like, in some ways, it was like the blind leading the blind. He didn't want to hear about the failures of other guys, because it only made him more depressed and tainted his outlook on the future.⁵¹ Oliver, Randy, and CJ, however, all found those connections to be very helpful, since they could talk about things that other people might have a hard time understanding. In addition to professional and peer counseling, there are a handful of helpful books, websites, and materials available to those battling same-sex attraction.

Conclusion

In my time talking to and studying the experiences of these four men, I found that we shared a lot of similar struggles. The way they talked about their temptations to homosexuality were much like the ways I think about the temptations I face. Maybe if you get a chance to talk with somebody like Nick and hear his story, you'll start to see that too. Yes, their struggle is unique, but they're still sinful people God loves. They are Christians, just like us, who are battling against a sinful nature that won't quit. They are saints living in a world that is opposed to God's law and God's plan for us.

So how do we reach them, and how do we help them? Understanding is key. How can we hope to help people if we don't understand their struggle? If we don't listen with compassion and give ourselves chances to learn, we will miss out on opportunities to reach people with a truly incomparable message.

Some people wonder how we have any chance winning people over to our side when the LGBT community's message of acceptance, love, and affirmation seems so much more appealing. I'll admit that the odds do seem stacked against us. But we have a secret weapon: the compelling gospel. If we are hoping to compete with the LGBT community by human standards, we may lose most of the time. If the message of law and gospel we preach were merely an

⁵¹ "Nick" Skype Interview.

intellectual exercise, and people had to decide if they wanted to be in the church or in the LGBT community, we wouldn't stand much of a chance. But we have something that's so much more than that. We have the compelling gospel. If anything is going to keep them coming back, it's the compelling gospel message. They will find themselves saying "I don't want to leave behind this lifestyle, but the gospel is so sweet and so unique that I am compelled to change."

But how do we reach them with this compelling gospel? How do we reach them with law and gospel if we can never get past giving them the law? How can that compelling gospel do its work if they close their ears before we get a chance to say it? Jesus gives us a great example in his time on earth. The Pharisees got mad with Jesus because he would eat with people who were known and labeled as sinners. These were not "the best of the worst." They hadn't cleaned up just enough so Jesus would accept them. Jesus went out of his way to reach them. Jesus was willing to spend time with them *before* they had cleaned up their act. Jesus reminded people that it's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. If that's the case, then we need to invite more sick people to church. And if they don't clean up and get healthy within the first two visits, we'll just keep preaching to them the healing gospel message. God is the one who will work in their hearts. God's undeserved, unconditional love is what will bring them back. Make sure they know the gospel—and not just law and gospel for their most difficult sin, but for the rest of them too. Please, do whatever is in your power to bring them that good news. Lives, souls, and futures are counting on it.

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