

Homosexuality

A Resource Manual for Christian Counselling

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Homosexuality and the Counsellee

No strenuous argument is needed to demonstrate that homosexuality (in general) and the counselling of it (in particular) is a controversial and complex issue. It is perhaps the single most feared topic for Christians to address, and has been accompanied by much difficulty; often with much resulting harm in families, communities and individuals.

Widely ranging attitudes and positions are reflected in both large and small groups and communities as well as in individuals. The Westboro Baptist Church and its infamous website, GodHatesFags.com, is at the most extreme anti-homosexuality end of the spectrum.¹ At the pro-gay end, there are many vocal organisations.² Also, apart from such organisations, individuals can and do hold any/all views across the spectrum. It should be noted that while opposition (whether hostile or peaceful) to homosexuality is primarily religiously motivated, many individuals will also oppose it for less explicitly 'religious' (i.e. cultural) reasons.

Recently, this spectrum has been increasingly reflected within Christianity as well. While the strong majority of the Church remains opposed to homosexuality, many affirming Christian groups, churches and organisations exist around the world.

It is because of this development within Christianity, that the Christian counsellor cannot assume the attitudes and/or counselling goals of the individual(s) seeking counselling in this area. What *can* be safely assumed is that most counselees will be aware of these common views, whether or not they hold those views themselves. Depending on their current views about homosexuality, they might find the traditional opposition frustrating, confusing and/or painful – though they could possibly have a less negative reaction as well.

It would seem to be a safe assumption (and would be most of the time) that the counsellee is seeking at least some kind of change – emotional, behavioural, cognitive, social, relational, spiritual or otherwise. However, they may have come under some level of pressure, influence or compulsion from either a parent or authority figure, thus making desire for any kind of change anything but a certainty.³

¹ Online at <http://www.godhatesfags.com> (accessed 13 October, 2009).

² For example, <http://thenewgay.net> and <http://www.radicalhomosexualagenda.org> (accessed 13 October, 2009); it must be said that these groups almost always are characterised by an approach that is far less hateful than the Westboro Baptist Church.

³ Gary R. Collins, *Christian Counseling: A Comprehensive Guide, revised ed.* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1988), 288.

Possible Causes for Homosexuality

The question of what causes homosexuality finds various kinds of answers. Gert Hekma observes that “causal explanations of homosexuality did not become common until the Enlightenment”, which may signal underlying philosophical presuppositions to the question.⁴

Two extremes are to be avoided concerning the causal factors of homosexuality. At one extreme, attributing homosexuality simply and singularly to the ‘choice’ of the individual, fails to appreciate some evidence for ‘hormonal-congenital influences that have a bearing on later sexual orientation’.⁵ Similarly, attempts to explain homosexuality as being a singular effect of biological or genetic causes is contrary to a considerable body of research.⁶

The approach that is most consistent with research is the recognition that homosexuality has no clear *single* cause. Collins advises that it ‘should be considered under three terms: nature, critical-period, and nurture.’⁷ Janis Bohan also acknowledges the reality of multiple factors, saying ‘[for] some, biology may play a major role; for others, choice predominates; for each, environmental forces likely contribute; for all, the meanings given by society shape how experiences will be understood and identities will be defined.’⁸

In terms of the psychological and social factors, Collins outlines five key theories: Parent-Child Relationships; Other Family Relationships; Other Early Experiences; Fear; and Willful Choice of Homosexuality.⁹ Hekma quotes neuroanatomist Byne, who says ‘it is imperative that behavioral scientists and physicians begin to appreciate the psychosocial complexity of sexual orientation and resist the temptation to hastily embrace simplistic biological explanations.’¹⁰

This balanced understanding of the multiplicity of causal factors for homosexuality will aid counsellors in sharing an informed perspective with counselees, and will help avoid the dual errors of what may be called ‘easy-change-ism’ on one hand and ‘made-that-way-ism’ on the other.

⁴ Gert Hekma, ‘Causal Theories of Homosexuality’ *Reader’s Guide to Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Ed. Timothy F. Murphy (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2000), 120.

⁵ Collins, *Christian Counseling*, 282.

⁶ *Ibid*, 282.

⁷ *Ibid*, 282.

⁸ Janis S. Bohan, *Psychology and Orientation: Coming to Terms* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 88.

⁹ Collins, *Christian Counseling*, 283-5; the counsellor’s awareness of the details of these factors is essential.

¹⁰ Hekma, ‘Causal Theories’ *Reader’s Guide*, 121.

Theological and Biblical Assessment of Homosexuality

The doctrine of the *Imago Dei*, stating that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, brings together the theological category of Anthropology and the theological source of Scripture, enabling us to assess homosexuality theologically and biblically at the same time.¹¹ Theologically, the *Imago Dei* finds its example and goal as none other than Jesus Christ, who *is* the Image of the invisible God (Col 1). Biblically, all human beings are created *in* the *Imago Dei*, as embodied and sexed (male and female) persons.

In addition to seeking only a ‘for or against’ position in relation to homosexuality in particular, it is also helpful to look at the place which human sexuality *in general* has theologically and biblically. Stanley Grenz helpfully offers a key understanding of human ‘sexuality’ (in general) beyond mere physical (i.e. genital) sexual relations, which sees embodiment as a central relationship-forming aspect which ‘includes the sexed body that marks a person as male or female’ and is bound up with ‘the sense of incompleteness... [and] the drive for completeness, that together lead to bonding.’¹² He continues that ‘[because] marriage does not exhaust human relationality, the physical union of male and female in marriage does not constitute the essence of human sexuality.’¹³ In sum, one need not be ‘sexually active’ to be genuinely and humanly ‘sexual’.

This refusal to give physical intercourse a definitive place in human sexuality is useful to keep in mind when discussing biblical texts dealing with homosexuality. Debates about the authority or irrelevance of Old Testament texts (Gen. 19:1-29; Lev. 18:22, 20:13), and technical discussions about the precise meaning of New Testament passages (Rom. 1:27; 1 Cor. 6:9-11) can be laborious and unfruitful. In treating the 1 Corinthians passage, Tom Wright helpfully provides an example of highlighting the non-definitive place which intercourse has in being a human.

“As with everything else on the list, these are practices that some people find they deeply want to engage in, so much so that in our own day... we have seen the rise of the

¹¹ Whilst it is theoretically possible to assess homosexuality within all standard systematic theological categories (Theology-Proper, Anthropology, Christology, Ecclesiology, Pneumatology and Eschatology), and whilst standard theological sources (Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience – additionally Culture and/or Revelation) enable data from literally any field to be included into a robust theological analysis, for our purposes here we shall restrict analysis primarily to the category of Anthropology and the source of Scripture.

¹² Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 301.

¹³ *Ibid*, 302.

words like 'homosexual' or 'gay' as an identifying label, a sign of a hidden 'identity' which can be 'discovered' or 'recognized'. Biblical witness and pastoral insight alike suggest that this is deeply misleading – as is the implication that all humans need active sexual experience, of whatever sort they prefer, in order to be complete, to be fully alive.”¹⁴

This wider appreciation of human 'sexuality' in general provides an appropriate theological and biblical context in which to affirm the Christian prohibition of homoerotic behaviour. Collins' summary remains an accurate statement of the traditional stance, that biblically, 'erotic homosexual acts' are wrong, whilst '[to] have homosexual tendencies, feelings, and desires is nowhere condemned in Scripture'.¹⁵

Counselling on Homosexuality: A Suggested Approach

Following on from this theological and biblical analysis, a suggested modality for counselling on homosexuality, including a clear focus on the theme of identity will be presented after treating two modalities from non-affirming (Collins) and affirming (Ritter/Terndrup) approaches to homoerotic behaviour.¹⁶

Collins

After emphasising the need for the counsellor to check their attitudes toward those with homosexual desires, Collins lays out the following steps.

1. Determine Counseling Goals. The counsellor is reminded to not assume they know what the views/goals of the counsellee are, and to patiently ask questions to determine shared goals.¹⁷
2. Instill Realistic Hope. This step warns against the extreme of unrealistic (and possibly idealistic) expectation for quick and easy change on one hand, and the extreme of hopeless inability to change on the other.¹⁸

¹⁴ Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians* (London: SPCK, 2003), 69.

¹⁵ Collins, *Christian Counseling*, 282; for a robust and sensitive treatment of the issue which takes an opposing stance, see chapter entitled 'Homosexuality' in Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (London: T&T Clark, 1996), 379-406; for an affirming perspective that (genuinely, yet not correctly in my view) attempts to use the Wesleyan Quadrilateral (Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience) to analyse the issue, see James B. Nelson, *Body Theology* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 55-71.

¹⁶ Kathleen Ritter and Anthony I. Terndrup, *Handbook of Affirmative Psychotherapy with Lesbians and Gay Men* (New York: Guilford, 2002), 168-181; Collins, *Christian Counseling*, 287-291.

¹⁷ Collins, *Christian Counseling*, 288.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 288-9.

3. Share Knowledge. Here, counsellors are invited to clarify misconceptions about the causes and permanence of homosexuality, including eventually distinguishing between ‘homosexual tendencies and homosexual actions.’¹⁹
4. Show Love and Acceptance of the Person. In this step the emphasis is on demonstrating the possibility and importance of developing and sustaining close, non-sexual relationships with friends of the same sex (including, even especially, the counsellor if possible).²⁰
5. Encourage Behavior Change. Here, the counsellee is encouraged to ‘avoid people, publications, and situations that are sexually arousing’ and to find ‘satisfaction and personal feelings of identity in nonsexual parts of life,’ thus fostering real and lasting behavior change.²¹
6. Recognize That Counseling May Be Complex and Time Consuming. Finally, the counsellor is to remember and appreciate the complexity and difficulty of counselling in this area, and to recognise their own level of competence and discern their ability to help the counsellee.

Collins’ modality is sound, informed, realistic and sensitive, yet the theme of identity only gets a passing and indirect mention in step 5. Whilst the counsellor is immensely helped by these steps, a more direct treatment of identity would make it all the more useful.

Ritter and Terndrup

The theme of identity is not hard to spot in the approach outlined by Ritter and Terndrup. The stated goal, ‘to facilitate identity formation in gay, lesbian, and bisexual clients,’ is expressed through an integration of the concepts of Cass, Troiden, Coleman and Grace into a 5 phase model for ‘Gay and Lesbian Identity Formation’.²²

Phase 1: Sensitization (Troiden); Pre-Coming Out (Coleman); Emergence (Grace).

The first stage involves dealing with client ‘feelings of estrangement, isolation, loneliness and fear’, including treatment of depression, illness, suicidal ideas and acting-out behaviors (‘*Initial Interventions*’, ‘*Alleviating Isolation and Depression*’, and ‘*Addressing Behavioral Problems*’).²³

¹⁹ Ibid, 289.

²⁰ Ibid, 289-90.

²¹ Ibid, 290.

²² Ritter and Terndrup, *Handbook of Affirmative Psychotherapy*, 169; we have only space here to follow the broad themes of the model, as it is quite thorough and comprehensive.

²³ Ibid, 169-171.

Phase 2: Identity Confusion (Cass, Troiden); Identity Comparison (Cass); Coming Out (Coleman); Acknowledgement (Grace). This phase outlines psychotherapeutic techniques which begin to more specifically foster homosexual identity, through challenging ‘heterosexist assumptions that others hold for them’ (*‘Empathic Exploration’*, *‘Superego Modification’*, *‘Facilitating Grief and Loss’*, *‘Challenging Inhibition Strategies’*, *‘Using Referrals and Adjuncts’*, and *‘Identifying Receptive Supporters’*).²⁴

Phase 3: Identity Tolerance (Cass); Identity Assumption (Troiden); Exploration (Coleman); Finding Community (Grace). Here the clients are enabled to ‘tolerate their new identity’, ‘attach either homosexual or bisexual meaning’ to sexual encounters with members of their own sex, and identify with the bisexual, gay, or lesbian label (*‘Therapeutic Continuity’*, *‘Reframing Developmental Lag’*, and *‘Finishing Adolescence’*).²⁵

Phase 4: Identity Acceptance (Cass); Commitment (Troiden); First Relationships (Coleman, Grace). Clients are supported in their participation in ‘sexual minority’ subcultures, and are referred to as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, which furthers ‘the consolidation of a healthier new identity’ (*‘Couple Counseling’*, and *‘Disclosure and Decision Making’*).²⁶

Phase 5: Identity Pride/Synthesis (Cass); Integration (Coleman); Self-Definition and Reintegration (Grace). In this final phase, counsellors patiently guide any clients who ‘virtually sever all ties with the sexual majority’ to have a less hostile posture, and help them to not to see heterosexuals as automatically against them (*‘Validating Anger at Oppression’*, *‘Challenging Dichotomies’*, *‘Reintegration’*, and *‘Reframing the Past’*).²⁷

Regardless of one’s views, and in spite of some positive psychotherapeutic practices it recommends (i.e. initial concern for harmful patterns of thought and behaviour, countering hostility toward heterosexuals, etc.), it is clear that this approach quite intentionally fosters homosexual identity-formation at nearly every step of the way. Significantly, even the possibility of heterosexual identity (or orientation) is not entertained for even a moment, let alone something for the counsellor to explore with the counsellee.

²⁴ Ibid, 171-174.

²⁵ Ibid, 174-176.

²⁶ Ibid, 176-178.

²⁷ Ibid, 178-181.

A Modality Suggestion

We will now outline a suggested four-point modality which makes use of our theological and biblical analysis, Collins' insights and some helpful elements from Ritter and Terndrup.²⁸

1. Understand the Person. Compassion, understanding and loving acceptance need to be shown not only at the start, but throughout the counselling period. Questions need to be worded (especially initially) in an affirming way, creating a non-threatening context. Attention also needs to be given specifically to thinking, tendencies or behaviour which may possibly be harmful or dangerous to the counsellee or those around them, such as extreme depression, substance abuse, school or work issues, or relationship and family problems.²⁹ Especially if the counsellee and counsellor are the same sex, it can often be helpful for the counsellee to experience a healthy, growing, stable, non-sexual relationship.³⁰
2. Discern the Goal. It is important not to assume that you know what the counsellee wants to get from the counselling. Depending on their views, and whether or not they have come of their own volition, they may have different goals for counselling than you may have assumed.³¹ Should the counsellee be homosexually active and not at all wanting to change this behaviour, the Christian counsellor operating within the traditional theological and biblical framework can still provide a compassionate listening ear and help with other counselling goals, such as help with depression, drug-abuse, relationship/family or other problems even if unable to support continuation of homosexual behaviour. The rest of this modality will assume that the counsellee has at least some desire (even if uncertain or confused) to discontinue the homoerotic behaviour.
3. Free the Soul. Having gained trust by understanding the person, and having clarified goals for counselling, the counsellor can now, in a non-threatening, conversational manner, discern the understanding the counsellee has of the issues related to causal factors of homosexuality or ways of dealing with it.

²⁸ Reference will be made to the relevant modality section as opposed to page number.

²⁹ Ritter and Terndrup: Phase 1.

³⁰ Collins: 4 – Show Love and Acceptance of the Person.

³¹ Collins: 1 – Determine Counseling Goals; as for Ritter and Terndrup, this is a significant omission on their part, which leaves the reader with the impression that their assumption is that the goal will always be the formation or solidification of homosexual identity.

This provides an opportunity to clarify or correct any misunderstandings or misinformation that the counsellee may have taken seriously, which can be quite freeing.³² A further key component of this stage is for the counsellor to encourage the counsellee to maintain a clear distinction between *desires*, *actions* and *identity*.³³ The term ‘homosexuality’ is best used to refer to homoerotic *desires*, whilst the term ‘homosexual’ implies an *identity* based on those *desires*. The counsellor should emphasise that *identity* should be based on relationship, not *desire* – and certainly not erotic desire. In Christian counselling, this can be reinforced by the theological and biblical understanding of human ‘sexuality’ as not being defined by erotic encounters of any kind (homosexual or heterosexual). It is also helpful to point out (when appropriate) that nobody acts upon every *desire* they have, and that (for example) there are many *heterosexual desires* that are not to be acted upon either: A married woman must not act upon any *heterosexual desires* for sexual intimacy with another man, just as an adult male with *heterosexual desires* toward a young female child must not act upon them either. Much of life (eating, spending money, spending time, etc.) is characterised by the need for self-control, so sexual *desires*, in addition to being poor foundations for personal *identity*, are merely one more thing which we want to control rather than be controlled by. It is one thing for you to have a *desire*, and quite another for a desire to have *you*.

4. Show the Way. The final component of this modality encourages the counsellees’ behaviour to be in continuity with both the goals and understandings previously covered. Negatively, this means encouraging the counsellee, in accordance with the agreed counselling goals, to discontinue modes of involvement with activities or places or people which encourage homoerotic behaviour or desire. Positively, this means encouraging the counsellee, in accordance with the understanding that his or her identity is

³² Collins: 3 – Share Knowledge; contra to Ritter and Terndrup, whose modality narrowly only advocates the sharing of perspectives which serve the goal of homosexual identity formation or the strengthening and reinforcing of homoerotic desire.

³³ The theme of ‘identity’ is indirectly treated in Collins: 5 – Encourage Behavior Change; in Ritter and Terndrup, however, ‘identity’ is, of course, the backbone and central goal of their approach (particularly in Phases 2 & 3), only precisely in the opposite sense (homosexual identity formation) than outlined here (the sharp distinction between homosexual *desire* and personal *identity*).

more than their sexual desires, to develop modes of involvement with activities, places and people which are non-erotic.³⁴

As we've seen, the theme of identity is of foremost importance. This modality, among other things, intentionally opposes allowing erotic sexual desire in general, and homoerotic sexual desire in particular, to have a formative place in personal identity. Instead, it encourages the counsellee to renew their appreciation of non-sexual activities and relationships, in addition to fostering self-control of homoerotic desire, as a particular example of self-control of various other unwanted desires.

File of Key Resources

Chapter 19, 'Homosexuality' in *Christian Counseling: A Comprehensive Guide*, by Gary R. Collins.

With this chapter, Collins offers an informed, balanced treatment which remains within a traditional Judeo-Christian framework. His treatment of biblical, causal, counselling and preventative issues comprise an approach that manages to be both hope-filled and realistic.

Both counsellor and counsellee will find this content invaluable in clarifying and informing them on homosexuality. It is appropriate material to share with persons of literally any opinion on the issue. Counsellors should not share it in the first session(s), but wait until things have progressed to the point where understandings are shared and misinformation corrected.

'Causal Theories of Homosexuality' by Gert Heckma in *Readers Guide to Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Ed. Timothy F. Murphy.

This is an immensely helpful resource to have available and be familiar with. In under two pages, Heckma outlines a helpful and balanced account of the history of attempts to understand causal factors giving rise to homosexual desire and behaviour.

Because this resource is not from a 'Christian' publication, and because it accounts for a wide range of scholarship, it will be immensely useful in countering views that homosexuality has only (or primarily) biological causes. This too, is not first-session material, but can be very appropriate when discussing and clarifying views and information.

³⁴ Collins: 5 – Encourage Behavior Change, which is one of the few places where the theme of 'identity' comes through in his treatment; and again, Ritter and Terndrup construe things precisely in the opposite direction, encouraging only involvement with activities, places and people which is in accordance with their outlined goal of homosexual identity formation.

Chapter Three: ‘Angels and Animals’ in *Sex God*, by Rob Bell.

The strength of this chapter is two-fold. On one hand, it reflects clear thinking on human sexuality which well expresses theological and biblical convictions. On the other, it is highly readable and memorable. The key analogy contrasting ‘angelic’ (i.e. denied, repressed, under-appreciated) sexuality and ‘animalistic’ (i.e. uninhibited, uncontrolled, over-appreciated) sexuality is clear, Christian and clever.

This can be an excellent resource to share especially with adolescent counselees or young adults (though other age groups would benefit from it as well). It facilitates the goal of removing eroticism from the centre of ones consciousness and identity. This too, should not be shared until after the first session.

‘Free To Be Me’ (website: www.freetobeme.com).

This Canadian-based website is an initiative of New Direction for Life Ministries, and is well-ordered, functional, user-friendly and attractive. It doesn’t have a ‘Christian-ese’ or ‘gay-hating’ or ‘we’ll fix you’ feel to it. The answers discourage homosexual identity and actions, whilst encouraging patience with desires.

This will prove to be a very appropriate tool to use quite early in the counselling process, even before the first session. It is appropriate for counselees with any view on homosexuality.

‘Homosexuality – A Thoughtful Analysis’ by Chip Ingram (booklet).

With this 21-page booklet, Chip Ingram provides a fairly standard ‘loving response’ to the issue of homosexuality. He advises that the beginning of dialogue is often sadly a much-needed apology for the hateful attitude many Christians have toward homosexuals. Another strength of the booklet is the clear format responding patiently-yet-directly to pro-gay perspectives.

This booklet will especially be helpful in softening the views of a counsellee who was taught extreme or hateful views about homosexuality. This would be a resource to share some time after the first session.

‘Appendix: My Frequently Asked Questions’ in *Giant Killers* by Dennis Jernigan.

The main strength of this material is the fact that it is a personal response of a person who no longer identifies as a homosexual. The standard questions are raised and responded to in a way that is personal, honest and often passionate.

This is not the resource to share with someone who leans toward acceptance of homoerotic desire. Rather, this can be appropriately shared with someone who would benefit from the experience of someone who previously struggled with homosexuality.

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Key Resources not in Bibliography

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