

Introduction

I'd like us to imagine two pastoral situations, that if you haven't already encountered, you're likely to. First, a man in your congregation comes to you and says "I believe in the traditional Christian sexual ethic, that sex is reserved for marriage and marriage is the monogamous union of a man and a woman. But I've always struggled with same-sex attraction. I don't indulge that desire in thought or action, but that compulsion or orientation to same-sex attraction has been present with me my entire adult life. Pastor, do I need to repent of that orientation?"

A lot of us are wondering what the big deal with the question is. Half are probably thinking, "He's not acting on it, so of course he doesn't need to repent! He's already given up so much for Jesus, it's cruel to add new laws on top of him." The other half are probably thinking "Of course he needs to repent! A same-sex orientation is sinful, and ignoring any remnant of sin *is* a form of indulging sin!"

The second scenario: A prepubescent, 11-year old boy comes to you and says "I think I'm gay." How do we respond? How do we think theologically and biblically about what he's saying and how that overlaps with the man from our first scenario?

My objective this morning is to help us think biblically and theologically about the issue of same-sex attraction & orientation, mortification, and pastoral care. My premise is that pastoral care begins with Jesus' commission to the apostles in John 20, that in the power of the Holy Spirit, we declare the reality of the forgiveness of sins through the proclamation of the gospel. This means that in order to effectively care pastorally for those in our churches struggling with same-sex attraction, we need to have a robust theological grounding for our withholding or assuring them of forgiveness.

My approach to talking about this, then, is to frame things from the perspective of the Westminster Confession and Catechisms. As elders we vow that these contain the system of doctrine found in the scriptures, which means their theological rhythm should set the cadence of our pastoral and biblical reasoning.

The Westminster Standards are a treasure trove, should frame our thinking as pastors and elders, and will help us address the two different kinds of reactions we may have had to the scenarios I presented.

I'm going to hit four major areas this morning, for about an hour, followed by a time of Q&A and discussion. Those four areas are 1) The fall into sin and misery; 2) Repentance and mortification in union with Christ; 3) What exactly is same-sex attraction & orientation, including a discussion of that hot button topic of "identity", and then 4) Put it all together for pastoral application. For the sake of time I'm not going to engage with all of the biblical texts that could be invoked in this discussion; for those exegetical areas you'd like more of I'd recommend the provided reading list, the proof texts of the Westminster Standards, and the Q&A time.

The Fall Into Sin and Misery

To start with, we need ask what sin is. Sin is not a substance, it has no independent existence. It is the privation or deprivation or absence of the good. It is non-existence and corruption. There's a scene in the movie version of LoTR: *The Fellowship of the Ring* where the evil wizard Saruman asks an

orc if he knows where orcs come from. The wizard explains that evil powers took the good Elves and twisted, mutilated, and corrupted them. Tolkien is at pains in his work to explain that the powers of evil can never create something; all they can do is twist the good.

Tolkien is just taking this from Christianity, which has loudly, since Augustine, stated that sin is the twisting, maiming, corrupting of God's good creation. Sin may have power and a domain, but it has no existence itself, only the corruption of God's creation. Sin is a cavity.

What that means is that all sin is a twisting of the good. All vices are shadows and distortions of the fruit of the Spirit. Now, there's not a one-to-one correspondence between vices and virtues, as if sin is the evil twin or doppelgänger of a virtue. What this does mean is that all sin is the good gone wrong.

When Adam and Eve sinned that's what happened to all of creation, including themselves and the rest of humanity.

WLC 23. Into what estate did the fall bring mankind?

A. The fall brought mankind into an estate of sin and misery.

“Estate” is just the old English way of saying condition. Humanity and creation moved from an estate of goodness into a condition of sin and misery. Both of these two estates deserve our attention and help us understand how we should minister to our LGBT+ neighbors.

First, let's talk about the estate of sin.

What is the estate of sin?

WSC Q. 18. Wherein consists the sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell?

A. The sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell consists in the guilt of Adam's first sin, the want of original righteousness, and the corruption of his whole nature, which is commonly called original sin; together with all actual transgressions which proceed from it.

The condition or state of sinfulness is guilt, lacking our own righteousness, our natures being morally corrupt (original sin), and the actual sins that proceed from our nature. A similar definition is given in WCF 6.4, which, like WSC 18, mentions that out of our corrupt natures proceeds all actual sins.

There's a two-fold distinction being made here. On the one hand, there's moral corruption of our natures. This is usually what we mean when we use the phrase “sin nature” or say that people are naturally evil or totally depraved. On the other hand, is our sinful behavior, the “actual transgressions”. This latter category is the one I think most Christians have in mind when they talk about sin: “Is it a sin?” is the kind of question they ask.

The actual transgressions, the sinful acts are defined in WSC Q. 14.

What is sin?

A. Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God.

Sin is lawlessness. Deprivation of God's law, corruption by lack of conformity. It's bad behavior and actions.

However, it's not just the latter, behavioral aspect that is sin. WCF 6.5, "This corruption of nature...itself, and all the motions thereof, are truly and properly sin." Our very nature itself is sin and a violation of God's law. WCF 6.5 also comments that this corruption of our nature, original sin, remains in the Christian their entire lifelong. We'll come back to this idea of "motions thereof", but here the Confession is teaching that there is an internal, moral corruption with external manifestations.

We sin because we are sinners. Our actual sins are birthed by our sinful nature. This is what Jesus is teaching in Matthew 15 when he says that it's not what goes into a man that corrupts him, but what comes out of a man.

Here's how WCF 6.6 puts it, "Every sin, both original and actual, being a transgression of the righteous law of God, and contrary thereunto, doth, in its own nature, bring guilt upon the sinner, whereby he is bound over to the wrath of God, and curse of the law, and so made subject to death, with all miseries spiritual, temporal, and eternal."

Not only our actual sins, but our sin nature is a transgression of God's law, and both who we are in our being and what we do in our behavior make us guilty and deserving God's judgment. We are bad and we do bad.

Evangelicals are really good on this point. Most of our gospel presentations focus on this part of sin and the human condition. But remember the Westminster Standards speaks of the fall leading us into two estates, two conditions. WCF 6.6 starts to explain this by saying that sin "made [us] subject to death, with all miseries spiritual, temporal, and eternal."

That second estate is the estate of misery.

WSC Q. 19. What is the misery of that estate whereinto man fell?

A. All mankind by their fall lost communion with God, are under his wrath and curse, and so made liable to all miseries in this life, to death itself, and to the pains of hell forever.

The estate of misery is the condition of suffering, and is a consequence of humanity being corrupted by sin. WLC 28 develops this a bit further:

What are the punishments of sin in this world?

A. The punishments of sin in this world are either inward, as blindness of mind, a reprobate sense, strong delusions, hardness of heart, horror of conscience, and vile affections; or outward, as the curse of God upon the creatures for our sakes, and all other evils that befall us in our bodies, names, estates, relations, and employments; together with death itself.

There are two arenas of suffering and misery. There's the internal, which concerns our hearts, our souls, our wills, and our affections. Like with the phrase "motions", we'll come back to this idea of affections. This inward arena isn't a repeat of the estate of sin, but explaining that all of our faculties, body, mind, soul, have been broken by the fall and their true repair is beyond our power.

The other arena of misery and suffering is external, outward: some of this is still moral, like being estranged from God, living under condemnation, but some is also environmental. The world hurts. Our bodies are frail. And this is just the way things are now; there is suffering in the world and our lives regardless of how godly we behave. We get bullied, lead leaks into the water, we face cancer, we endure heartbreak and betrayal, natural disasters strike. Some of these are the results of other's sin, some not. Another example of bodily frailty is the genetic component for substance dependency, like alcoholism. Some people are just born with that bodily weakness, which when exposed to certain substances, their faculties, both physiological and moral, are more prone to weakness and temptation.

So, some of the estate of misery is intertwined with the estate of sin: our moral corruption and God's judgement. But some of the estate of misery is not: our bodily frailty and the suffering. But all of the estate of misery is *of* sin: it is the corruption of God's good creation, the privation and deprivation of the good.

To summarize where we are so far: the estate of sin is an internal, moral corruption that manifests with external, sinful behavior. The estate of misery explains our brokenness, both internally (in our minds and souls) and externally in our environment, which includes our physical bodies. When the New Testament speaks of the "flesh" being at war with the Spirit, this estate of sin and misery is often what is in view: Our original sin, our morally impaired faculties, and our constitutional frailty.

Enter stage left: temptation.

To understand how temptation works we need to understand what it is. First, temptation is not sin. The experience of temptation is not indigenous to the estate of sin or misery; think for instance of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden being tempted by Satan. Leaving aside how Satan got there, the fall had not yet occurred when Eve was tempted. Being tempted to sin does not mean that you are sinning.

Temptation is also not desire. Nor does temptation only exercise power on bad desires. Temptation is an appeal to a desire, to grasp a desire, but to lay hold of it by sinful means. Temptation is a tug to get the good things the wrong way. That's what sin is: good things gone wrong, and temptation is sin appealing to us to fulfill our desire through the wrong path.

Think about Adam and Eve in the garden. How was Eve tempted? She saw that the tree of the knowledge and good evil was pleasant. She was right! It was a good tree, just like everything else God made. And Satan allured her with the promise to be like God, a wonderful desire. That is a good thing to want. The sin of our first parents was not the temptation or the looking or the desire, but the disobedience. It was the transgression of God's law. It was grasping a good thing the wrong way.

This is how James describes the nature of temptation in James 1:14-15, "But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin."

Now, what we just saw is that the estates of sin and misery compromised all of our desires. We not only want the good things the wrong ways, but we also now want the wrong things. That's the "vile

affections” of the state of misery, the “motions” of original sin as WCF 6.5 put it. What and how we want has been corrupted, and the impulses arising from within us, the motions or movements towards desire, have been compromised, and this is also sin itself.

So what do we make of the temptation of Jesus? Jesus did not enter into the estate of sin: he had no original sin and had no transgressions. Nor was Jesus liable for sin and therefore wasn't in the misery of hard-heartedness or separation from God in his life. But Jesus was living in part of the state of misery. He was subjected to the harshness of this world and afflicted with bodily frailty. He got tired, tired of people, was a man of sorrows, got thirsty and hungry.

When he was in the wilderness and fasting for 40 days he was experiencing immense frailty. Satan's temptations were all attempts to leverage Jesus' frailty and good desires (food, comfort, worship) to sin. Have these good things the wrong way.

This is how Hebrews 2 can speak of Jesus being tempted in every way like us, yet without sin. The intensity of Satan's temptation was configured to match the intensity of Christ's desires. And Christ resisted successfully. C. S. Lewis observes that we who so easily give in to temptation don't really understand its true nature because of the ease with which we can concede to it. Satan and sin don't bother to bring out the big guns with us. Jesus understands temptation better than any of us because he has never given into it, despite the intensity of Satan's assault. It's those who resist temptation who understand it best, and this is why Jesus is our perfect, sympathetic high priest.

How did Jesus resist Satan so successfully? Two ways. First, Jesus was driven into the wilderness under the power of the Holy Spirit. His 40-day fast was a time of preparation for the temptation by growing into dependence on the Spirit. We'll come back to this idea. The second is that Jesus exercised self-control. His inward motions, or desires, were things he controlled and led rather than being led by. This is what James 1 is getting at when we're told that desire conceives and gives birth to sin: when our desires are not ordered, pointed to God's good, when the compass of our souls is set on our own motions, desires, wants, then temptation gets in and births sin. When our desires, our motions, are centered on God's will and good, both in what we want and how we get it, we're able to resist temptation. This idea is how the Westminster Catechisms actually talk about the requirements of the 10th Commandment, you shall not covet — you shall not “covet”, you shall not allow the motions of your desires aim at anything other than the good of your neighbors. Jesus regulated his desires towards God's good under the power of the Spirit.

The temptation of Christ is instructive here for another reason: the temptation did not arise from Christ's sin, since Jesus had none. The intensity and besetting nature of temptation can arise entirely external to us. Being intensely tempted to sin, having your desires tugged, does not require you to be in the state of sin.

Temptations to sin then can 1) arise inwardly, an impulse from our corrupted nature and corrupted desires; or 2) arise externally, like with Christ, when the harshness of the world makes the sinful solution to good desires appealing.

It's here that I want to introduce the word “orientation”. This will be developed further, but in this context, an orientation towards a temptation means a weakness or propensity towards a temptation. Think for instance of those with a genetic propensity to substance abuse and addiction. The possession of that weakness isn't sinful, but it makes it easier to fall into a particular kind of sin, like

alcoholism or drunkenness. An orientation to temptation can also describe a consistent, besetting temptation. This is when a pull to sinfully fulfill a desire constantly confronts a person, whether that desire is good or bad.

Now, experientially, since unlike Jesus we do have original sin, are corrupt by nature, and our moral faculties are impaired, we can't differentiate between temptations that arise internally or externally. All temptations we face leverage our desires, and all of our desires are corrupt, because our good desires have been tainted by sin. And that brings us to how we should respond to sin and temptation.

Repentance and Mortification in Union with Christ

I think the most important, certainly the greatest question, in the Westminster Catechisms, is this:

Q. 20. Did God leave all mankind to perish in the estate of sin and misery?

A. God having, out of his mere good pleasure, from all eternity, elected some to everlasting life, did enter into a covenant of grace, to deliver them out of the estate of sin and misery, and to bring them into an estate of salvation by a redeemer.

But God! Salvation is God's bringing us from the estates of sin and misery into the estate of salvation and grace by and through and with Jesus.

The estate of salvation is our state—condition—of being saved by grace. Where Christ takes on our sin and brokenness and gives us himself, which is manifested in our justification, adoption, sanctification, and all the other graces that show forth our communion with him. And it's sanctification in our union with Jesus that we're turning to now.

What is sanctification? WSC 35 gives a quick definition.

A. Sanctification is the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.

We have been corroded by sin, and sanctification is the restoration of our corrupted nature, in all its parts. Sanctification in this life focuses on the moral dimensions of that corrupted nature, and Jesus by his Spirit renews and is renewing us in our entirety. This is a renewal that empowers us to die to sin, meaning we can effectively resist sin. WCF 13.1, the chapter on sanctification, provides more information.

They, who are once effectually called, and regenerated, having a new heart, and a new spirit created in them, are further sanctified, really and personally, through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, by his Word and Spirit dwelling in them: the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed, and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified; and they more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces, to the practice of true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.

When God saves us, he unites us to Jesus, who applies the benefits of his death and resurrection to us by his Spirit. When that happens the power of sin over the Christian is broken. Think of Paul's words in Romans 6: we are joined to Jesus, we have been baptized into the death of Christ, and have

died to sin, and we are joined in his resurrection over the power of sin. Our old self, our corrupted nature was crucified with Jesus, we are no longer enslaved to sin, we are dead to sin and alive to God in Christ; for sin will have no dominion over you since you are under grace! If you are in Christ, you are no longer under the dominion and power of sin but the under the dominion and power of grace.

Sinclair Ferguson once commented that the role of the pastor can be summarized as convincing non-Christians that they are under the dominion of sin and reminding Christians that we are under the dominion of grace. Sanctification is the definitive reality that we have been truly and personally delivered from the power of sin and the progressive reality that we are empowered to continue dying to sin.

The progressive aspect of sanctification is crucial for our discussion: WCF 13.2-3 goes on,

This sanctification is throughout, in the whole man; yet imperfect in this life, there abiding still some remnants of corruption in every part; whence ariseth a continual and irreconcilable war, the flesh lusting against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh.

In which war, although the remaining corruption, for a time, may much prevail; yet, through the continual supply of strength from the sanctifying Spirit of Christ, the regenerate part doth overcome; and so, the saints grow in grace, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

Three observations. 1) Sin nature remains in the Christian, so moral corruption is always present until either heaven or the return of Christ. 2) This remaining sin leads to a war; and the war never goes away. This is a resistance between the corruption of our nature, the lusts or motions of the flesh and the Spirit's regeneration on the one hand, and the wanting to turn back to sin to achieve our desires on the other. 3) Since sanctification is the application of Christ's work of redemption in the power of the Holy Spirit, the regenerate part grows in strength and Christians increase in our ability and willingness to resist sin and temptation.

Though we are not in the estate of sin, there are remnants of sin in us. And though we are in grace, we still face the reality of misery in this life, just as Jesus did. How do we respond?

This is where repentance and mortification come in. We are to repent of our remaining sin and our sinful behaviors, and are to mortify the remaining power of sin and temptation.

First, repentance, which is certainly something we are more familiar with.

Martin Luther famously began his 95 theses quoting Matthew 4:17 and asserted, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." Repentance is to be the regular rhythm of the sanctified life. Repentance is defined in the Westminster Standards (e.g. WLC 76, WSC 87) as when a sinner, out of "true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience."

Acknowledge sin, hate sin, turn from sin, turn to God and grasp his mercy in Jesus, committed to striving after God in a renewed obedience. Interestingly, repentance unto life is the only doctrine besides faith in Jesus the Westminster Standards says every minister should be preaching.

Repentance is about acknowledging our being in the estate of sin, meaning both our sinful actions and our condition of original sin. Repentance requires us to then to not only reject and hate our bad behaviors, but to reject and hate our corrupted, sinful nature from which our actual transgressions arise. Repentance is a turning from ourselves to Christ, not only in our actions, but in our being.

Turning back to WCF 6.5 on sin, “This corruption of nature, during this life, doth remain in those that are regenerated; and although it be, through Christ, pardoned, and mortified; yet both itself, and all the motions thereof, are truly and properly sin.” Our corrupt nature, pardoned and its power broken, yet remains in us even after our regeneration, and even after we are in the estate of grace this corrupted nature is sin.

While this word does not appear in the Westminster Standards, what they’re describing here is the theological idea of “concupiscence.” Concupiscence is the impulses and desires arising from within us to sin, either by desiring the good thing the wrong way or desiring the wrong things. This a difference between the Roman Catholic Church on the one hand, and Protestant churches on the other. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that concupiscence isn’t sin, but the fuel for sin, while we teach that these motions and affections towards evil, concupiscence, is sin itself as well, since it arises from and is part of our corrupt nature. Repentance therefore includes repenting not only of our thoughts, words, and deeds, but of our affections and desires, our heart and being.

What about mortification? It’s an odd word, one that’s infrequently used. It means to kill or to put to death; to subdue. Mortification, unlike repentance doesn’t receive its own chapter in the Confession or series of questions in the Catechism, but it’s still present.

Mortification is putting to death the remaining sinful impulses and desires arising from within us, from within the estate of sin, and resisting the temptation and tugs that arise from outside us in the estate of misery (Käpik). The power to do this comes us being joined to the life of Christ and living in the power of his Spirit.

The reality of who we are as Christian is that God has made us alive together with Christ and has killed the power of sin over us. This is who we now are in our being. Colossians 3:1-17 is the best passage to begin with this. “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” that leads to “put to death what is earthly in you.” The opposite of the death of sin is the life of Christ; the opposite of sin is holiness. We are really and personally sanctified, now, because Christ’s life is our life; therefore we can and must progress in our sanctification now by killing sin and the temptations of the flesh.

Think again of WCF 6.5, “This corruption of nature... [is] through Christ, pardoned, and mortified” and WCF 13.1 “through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, by his Word and Spirit dwelling in [Christians]: the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed, and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified”.

All the places where the New Testament speaks of us having died with Christ, having been crucified with Christ, of having the life of Christ are speaking of this, as are all the places where scripture speaks of us having died to sin and the law and the flesh and calls upon us to put those things to death.

Sanctification is the reality that Christ has destroyed the power of sin in our lives by giving us his life, and now, in the power of the Holy Spirit, we are able to put to death the remnants of sin and to resist temptation. Sanctification entails a continual war against sin and temptation, but, even if the final battle is only finished in our glorification, the trajectory of the war is a progression of triumph.

Sin and temptation are mortified by putting them to death. To be crucified to the world, as Paul puts it in Galatians 6:14, is painful. To reject, refuse, starve sin, our desires, desires for the good gone wrong, is painful. To be crucified with Christ is not a painless process. The only people truly capable of mortifying sin are Christians, because mortification by definition is killing sin, resisting the corruption of sin, by relying on the power of Christ's death and resurrection through the work of the Holy Spirit for our renewal. But there is no greater power than the power of our Jesus, who has washed us by his blood and Spirit.

When Paul in Romans 6 speaks of our life in Christ, he does so in baptismal terms. By baptism we have been joined to Jesus in the power of his death and life and can therefore fight sin. We have passed through death and come through washed with Christ's blood by his Spirit. The other place that the Westminster Standards specifically invoke mortification is WLC 167, which reminds us that the "needful but much neglected duty of improving our baptism" is done all our lifelong "by drawing strength from the death and resurrection of Christ, into whom we are baptized, for the mortifying of sin, and quickening of grace". Being joined to Jesus means receiving his grace so that we may kill sin and be enlivened with his Spirit by his death and resurrection. You who have been baptized into Christ have been empowered by his life to do this.

This is one of the reasons that Jesus fasted before his temptation by Satan. He resisted temptation, mortified temptation, starved and killed it, not because of his superhuman strength of will or physical prowess, but because he was led by the exact same Holy Spirit that he has now granted us in our union with him. Jesus' temptation is a demonstration to us of what he has empowered us to do. He has broken the power of sin; we don't have to give into temptation; he has given us his Spirit, we can order our motions and affections to God's good and resist sin and temptation.

This is a central feature of what it means to be a Christian. We're all familiar with the three marks of the true church, the preaching of the word, administration of the sacraments, and exercise of church discipline. What many might not realize is that list is not present in the Westminster Standards, but comes from the 1561 Belgic Confession, one of the confessions of the Dutch Reformed tradition. So, it's cheating a little to invoke it, but what many also don't realize is that the Belgic Confession right after giving its marks of the true church gives three marks to identify the true Christian. First, by their faith in Christ and repentance of sins; Second, by their love of God and neighbor; Third, because they crucify the flesh and its works. The mortification of sin and the mortification, the resistance, of temptations arising from our bodily weakness, is an essential trait of what it means to be a Christian.

The Belgic Confession goes on to say,

Though great weakness remains in Christians,
they fight against the flesh and its works
by the Spirit all the days of their lives,
appealing constantly to the blood, suffering, death, and obedience of the Lord Jesus.

We can only mortify sin and temptation through reliance on the work of Christ and the power of the Spirit.

Now, as the Westminster Confession puts it, this is an ongoing war in our lives. This means three things for us. The first is that the conflict does not go away and we sometimes fail. In fact, as Luther put it, we need to repent all our life long. We need to die daily to sin and temptation. Oftentimes Romans 7 gets cited in this discussion, and in 7:23 Paul indeed speaks in terms of a war. Now, as many of you know, there is ongoing scholarly debate on whether Romans 7 is about the normal Christian life and struggle against sin, or about Paul describing trying to fight sin if you're not saved. Either way, Paul's greater point is that to fight sin under the power of the law is to fail; the solution is in Romans 8, where we learn we can successfully fight sin under the power of the Spirit.

So, secondly, we can successfully resist temptation and sin in the war; defeat and failure are not inevitable, because we have been granted the Spirit. And we should mature in our communion with Christ, grow in our faith and reliance on him, and see the corruption of sin lessen in our lives as our Christian walk progresses.

Third, that intensity of temptation is not a sign of sin. Being bombarded with intense, lifelong temptation to sin is the very characteristic of sanctification. The growth in holiness and grace means the death of sin, and sin does not go quietly. Besetting, well-nigh perpetual temptation, tugs to grasp good desires in wrong ways, can characterize someone's entire Christian life. That's not a sign of failing to trust Jesus, it's evidence of **war**. Jesus was deeply tempted by Satan, and we who take up our crosses to follow him should expect that. And since we remain in the estate of misery until our glorification, God has not promised that intense temptation will leave us alone. Rather, Jesus has instructed that we pray that God would not lead us into temptation, but instead deliver us from evil: and God answers that prayer by giving us the blood of Jesus and his Spirit to deliver us from the power of sin and to empower us to fight temptation.

So, to breathe and summarize: the fall led humanity into the estates of sin (moral corruption) and misery (suffering and weakness); in our union with Christ, we are sanctified and are able to successfully mortify our sin nature, sin, and temptation to sin, both in the estates of sin and misery. This is a war that Christ by his Spirit wins, but that means we are constantly beset by battle. This is absolutely essential to understand when we talk about ministering to our LGBT+, same-sex attracted neighbors, which we'll now turn to.

What does it mean to be gay?

That might seem like a mealy-mouthed question, but it's actually quite important. And sympathetic understanding is necessary before criticism.

To be gay or same-sex attracted or same-sex oriented is to be characterized by a consistent desire for same-sex intimacy. It is an affinity for and prevailing attraction to people of the same-sex. And a desire for same-sex intimacy is a good thing. Friendship, camaraderie, with people of the same sex is a good desire. Desiring to have an intimate relationship with people of the same sex is a good thing. Clicking with and being more comfortable around people of the same sex is a good thing.

The key here is that a gay identity, being gay, is not necessarily the same thing as being a practicing homosexual. How is that possible? Well, what is sin? Sin is a distortion of God's good creation, the good going bad. Sin is good desires grasped the wrong way, or wrong desires.

To be gay or same-sex attracted then is not only a consistent, intense desire for same-sex intimacy (a good thing!) but an accompanying, persistent temptation towards erotic, homosexual fulfillment of that desire. So what makes this bad? Sin is good desires, twisted. Now, without equivocation, hear me say that desires for sex with anyone outside of marriage is lustful and sinful, and that this includes desiring homosexual sex. This is a bad desire arising from our sin nature and moral corruption.

But there are also the good desires we have, being tugged towards fulfillment in a wrong way. It is a good thing to want an intimate connection with members of the same-sex; it is not the object of desire that is bad (the person of the same sex), but when that desire is manifested or expressed in sexual, erotic longing.

So where does this temptation, the tug towards distorted desires or to sinful fulfillment of bad desires come from? Well, the source of that temptation is in one of two places: Either the estate of sin, our original sin and corrupted nature — In this case the sinful desires and temptation arise from our sinful condition and are therefore sin themselves.

The other source of temptation is the estate of misery. Our bodily weakness and the suffering of the world. Jesus was hungry and alone in the wilderness and was more vulnerable to temptation around food, which is where Satan attacked. The source of temptation to fulfill the good desires and affinity for same-sex companionship can arise externally from us, meaning that "being gay" in this case is comparable to bodily frailty leaving us vulnerable to temptation. In the estate of misery, this a wound of the fall, not something arising from our own moral corruption. It is a vulnerability and bodily infirmity arising from the brokenness in creation that will be healed in glory.

As a bit of tangent, the Reformed, Westminsterian answer to whether or not people are born gay or become gay, is "yes". Our nature and our nurture are both fallen, and while the science of this is constantly in debate, for pastoral care it's rather immaterial. Our nature and our world are both fallen, both affect us, and we are redeemed from and called to live as redeemed people by Christ.

This is where the discussion on the term "gay Christian" or "gay Christianity" comes in. To catch some of us up to the discussion, there are two movements within gay Christianity. There is "Side A" which approves of homosexuality and homosexual practices as a valid Christian sexual expression, in contradiction to Christianity's historic biblical teaching.

Then there is gay Christianity's "Side B", which affirms the historic Christian ethic that sex is reserved for monogamous marriage between a man and a woman, that homosexuality [including lust] is sinful, that being gay is a result of the fall into the estates of sin and misery, but that you can retain a gay identity without practicing homosexuality. Now the Side B perspective is held by people all over the theological spectrum: Roman Catholic, Reformed, evangelical, mainline, which means there is a good bit of theological diversity in explaining how this is the case.

So why would someone who rejects homosexual practice or desire as sinful still describe themselves as gay? Well, in the first place "gay" is used to describe that consistent desire for same-sex intimacy

and affinity. Here's how one Side B thinker (Julie Rodgers) put it, "A gay orientation can be understood as an overall draw toward someone of the same sex, which is usually a desire for a deeper level intimacy with those of the same sex. Just like a heterosexual orientation can't be reduced to a desire for straight sex, a gay orientation can't be reduced to a desire for gay sex. This longing for intimacy is usually experienced as a desire for nearness, for partnership, for close friendship, rich conversation, and an overall appreciation of beauty."

Meaning that to be gay is to be characterized by non-erotic attraction, desire, affinity, and appreciation of members of the same-sex. Some Side B proponents argue that being gay enables one to have greater depths of intimacy and joy in chaste same-sex friendships. This is critically important to understand of the Side B position, because when they describe themselves as gay or suggest that being gay is sanctifiable, they are not talking about desire for sex with people of the same sex. They are describing an orientation towards appreciation and chaste desire for people of the same sex. For their desires to be same-sex oriented means that their longings and pull are for people of the same-sex. In this instance, describing themselves as a gay is describing the who they are oriented towards (people of the same sex), but not the how. For that to be sanctified, is to have those good, prevailing desires expressed and fulfilled in a godly, chaste way.

In the second place, someone who rejects homosexual practice or desire as sinful might still describe themselves as a gay Christian as a way of talking about the persistent tug in their life they experience towards homosexual temptation. This is typically what people who use the phrase "I struggle with same-sex attraction" are getting at. That their experience in life is one of a perpetual, besetting tug towards homoerotic desire that they are resisting. This is also normally what we mean when we speak of same-sex or gay orientation: that our sexual desires have been oriented, directed towards people of the same sex. But this can also mean that our temptations are oriented and directed towards people of the same sex. In this case, someone saying "I'm a gay Christian" means that their temptations are consistently oriented or directed towards same-sex sin, not that they are giving into that temptation or that they have lustful, homoerotic desires left unaddressed in their hearts.

Now, both these ways of self-describing as a gay Christian go together. Sin corrupts our desires and affinities, so any special or intense or deep longing for relationships with people of the same sex will inevitably be corrupted by our sin nature and will inevitably have the good desires tempted towards a sinful fulfillment. This is an area where I sharply dissent from the Side B movement: a same sex orientation is always accompanied by a specific temptation to sexual sin, even if the orientation is not always accompanied by a sinful desire. A same-sex orientation's defining feature is an orientation towards temptation or sin, and therefore cannot be celebrated.

In light of how charged these terms are in our culture and churches, why would anyone call themselves a gay Christian? Let me give you two examples. First, imagine a college student. He has an appreciation for the things our culture normally thinks of as feminine, he prefers the company of guys and just clicks emotionally with them better, he is not attracted to or sexually interested in women, and though he finds himself tempted towards sexually lusting after men, he is committed to the biblical sexual ethic. The word we have for his very recognizable experience of this is "gay". It is an understandable term and vocabulary that gives expression to his experience.

Second, imagine a pastor who had struggled with same-sex attraction his entire life. He's ministering in his city's gay scene, and trying to explain how his experience of a consistent desire and affinity for same-sex intimacy, though buffeted by a persistent temptation to same-sex desire, is consistent with

Christianity if expressed chastely. The phrase “same-sex attracted” is not widely known or intelligible outside of the church, but “gay” is; what term might he use to describe himself to make his testimony intelligible to non-Christians?

Any label is limited; conversation and explanation are always warranted. Jumping to conclusions about motive and purpose and labels is uncharitable. And this brings us to the question of “identity”. It’s not uncommon to hear people say that if you’re a Christian that you shouldn’t identify as a “gay”; that our identity is in Christ and that any modification of that, like with “gay Christian” is a distortion of our identity in Christ.

What is an identity? Now we all have identities that are subordinate to and descriptive of who we are apart from Christ. I’m a man, son, husband, father, pastor. I’m an American, a veteran. I’m a millennial. I’m white; while I wasn’t born there, I was raised in Texas, and so I identify as and self-conceive of myself as a Texan. And I am a Reformed Christian. These identities don’t supersede or change my ultimate identity, that I have been crucified with Christ and that is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. These identities are true, but that they relativized by my being in Christ, my ultimate reality. It’s when I take any of those things and place them above or alongside God, not in the order of description, but importance, that I have transgressed into the sin of idolatry. I recommend here Kelly Kapic’s book *You’re Only Human* on this, which I failed to place on the recommended reading list. And know what else I am? I am prideful, angry, bitter and the chief of sinners. I may struggle with those things, but only because I have a sin nature from which my actual transgressions spring. And yet, because I am in Christ, I am *Simul Justus et Peccator*, simultaneously justified and a sinner, as Luther put it.

“Identity” can mean something as simple as a label that describes an experience. To “identify” as or have a self-conception of a gay Christian can be a way of describing the experience of being gay and saved. Think of the recovering alcoholic who hasn’t had a drink in 25 years; they might still describe and label themselves as a sober alcoholic as a shorthand to explain their experience of desiring alcohol (a good thing) and being tempted to overindulge (a bad fulfillment).

“Identity” can also mean something like “this is who I am in my essence” or “who I am ontologically”, and I endorse this identity. And to proactively identify with same-sex orientation, in the sense of expressing solidarity is more complicated. On the one hand, if being gay is only about desires and affinities for same-sex intimacy, then there’s nothing wrong with expressing solidarity with this identity. On the other, sin does not have an independent existence; sin, corruption, and temptation are never who someone is in their essence, but are a distortion of God’s good creation. To identify in solidarity with a temptation or an impulse to sin is to affirm those temptations or sinful impulse which arise from our sin nature. And to be clear, you can’t repent of or mortify that which you affirm.

And that’s the rub here: experientially, we cannot differentiate whether temptations arise from the estate of sin or misery. Every temptation arising from outside us is appealing to a desire that is totally depraved. There’s a danger any time we consistently think of and consider ourselves by the category of our temptations. This can become a feedback loop to the soul. And since we are united to Christ in the estate and dominion of grace, we have been made alive and are empowered to put sinful desires to death and resist temptations. There is a danger whenever we talk to ourselves about ourselves in terms of our struggles for our unfulfilled desires rather than in the terms of what Jesus

has done, and who and where we are now, that we slip into identifying our sin nature or temptation as an inextricable, inevitable reality outside the scope of Jesus' redemption.

Here, the EPC's Pastoral Letter on Human Sexuality is very helpful. "In some cases, after receiving wisdom from godly counselors, it could be helpful for some Christians to make known publicly their ongoing, largely fruitful struggle with same-sex attraction." This isn't just about the wisdom in how we publicly describe ourselves in order to avoid unnecessary or divisive confusion that might come when we call ourselves gay Christians, but a reminder that it is wise to think of ourselves first as people sanctified in Christ, and that in and with Christ, the regenerate part is overcoming original sin and by the Spirit he is empowering me to fight temptation. This doesn't rule out identifying ourselves or self-labeling as same-sex attracted or a gay Christian, but does mean that we should exercise wisdom in how we think about and describe ourselves so that we constantly keep our eyes on what Christ has done, is doing, and we are receiving in salvation.

What are the expectations and what should be wanted?

The language of "largely fruitful struggle" prompts a number of questions. What should the expectations be in this life for those who experience same-sex attraction or have a gay orientation?

That goes two directions: what is expected of those who are same-sex attracted and what can they expect out of their sanctification in union with Christ. And that has to be the starting point.

We are united to Jesus, and our estate of sin has been pardoned and mortified. Our sin nature has been killed. We are washed, we are sanctified, we are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. And yet the remnants of sin are still present, and we are left in the misery of this world, and since we have the first fruits of the Spirit, with groans of pain, we eagerly wait for the redemption of our bodies, our frailty and weakness.

With this as the start, the first thing expected is repentance. Repentance is to be done for same-sex actions, lusts, erotic affections and desires. We are to repent both of our sins committed volitionally, willfully, and for our sins which proceed from of us unconsciously. Actual transgressions emerge from this remaining original sin, which is itself sin, and so both knowing and unknowing sins are to be hated, lamented, and forsaken. And since our sin nature is sin itself, we need to repent of our distorted nature, including our being itself, all its distortions, including corrupted same-sex desires and same-sex orientation to sin.

This is one of the most valuable aspects of having a corporate confession of sin in your worship service. It is easy to be selective and focus on the known sins in personal, private confession of sin; and specific sins should be confessed specifically! But having a shared, general confession of sin forces the people of God to be confronted with the reality we sin unknowingly and the motions of our hearts are themselves sin that need to be confessed and repented of. And, more importantly, that known, unknown, and our original sin all find forgiveness from the Father who cleanses us from all unrighteousness.

The second thing expected is mortification. We who are same-sex oriented and united to Christ have had our sin nature killed and have been empowered to continually mortify sinful desires. Sinful same-sex desires are no different. In fact, to intentionally leave a remnant of sin and sinful desires

unmortified is sin itself: it is refusing to hate the sin. The mark of the true Christian is one who crucifies the flesh and its work.

So then maybe more importantly, and certainly more difficult than repentance, we have been empowered to mortify temptation, including temptations to fulfill good desires for same-sex intimacy and affinity in erotic and sinful ways. Mortifying temptation means giving it no room, refusing it, resisting it, taking steps to avoid, proactively ordering your life to resist and avoid it, sacrificing other good things in your life so that you may avoid and successfully fight it, relying on the Holy Spirit in prayer to strengthen you against it, requesting that God would fulfill your good desires in godly ways, cultivating love for Christ through spiritual disciplines to strengthen you against temptation, to identify the temptation as bad and temptation to sin.

Mortification of temptation does not mean the temptation goes away. It may go away. God may remove this thorn in the flesh from you. But he may not. Mortification of temptation means that you get better at resisting the allure of sin, that you grow in the grace of rejecting temptation. This is what I think the “largely fruitful struggle” language of the EPC’s pastoral letter is about: not the absence of temptation or the absence of an orientation to temptation, but the presence of Spirit empowered mortification of sin and temptation.

And this is what people who are same-sex attracted should expect out of Jesus. We have been washed, and we are waiting. Since we are united to Jesus, the Holy Spirit is and will continue to conform us more and more to the image of Jesus. That means we will be growing in our communion with Christ, in righteousness and holiness. And that’s the key: the opposite of homosexuality is not heterosexuality, but holiness. God nowhere promises that if you come to faith in Jesus you’ll become straight.

He does promise that you will grow in sanctification. So you should expect as you mature as a Christian to improve in ordering your inward motions, your desires, to love God and your neighbor. That you will grow in the fruit of the Spirit, including self-control and patience. That you will get better at repenting and better at mortifying sin, your flesh, and temptation.

You may remain same-sex oriented: finding your persistent attractions, desires, and affinities remain for people of the same sex. But you should grow in ordering those preference, desires, and affinities in a way that is righteous and holy, and should grow in killing the sinful expression of those desires. You may remain same-sex oriented: facing a persistent temptation to sin. God never promises to remove us from the estate of misery and to remove us from besetting temptation in this life, but he has promised and has given us Christ to rescue us from temptation, so as you grow in love for Jesus, you should grow in resisting that temptation.

You should also expect sanctification to be a war. I had a good friend, for many years, who struggled with same-sex attraction. He was a Christian, knew homosexuality was sinful, and didn’t want to sin. And he desperately longed for same-sex intimacy and friendship. But he also was persistently tempted and pulled towards homosexual desires. And he came to a moment of truth: he looked at his life, and saw that the future included a lot of unfulfilled longing and love. A lifetime of an aching heart with desires that seemed like they could only be fulfilled by sinning. And he saw Jesus there, with salvation accomplished and redemption promised. And my dear friend saw the cost of following Christ, and said no thank you. He gave up resisting and is happily married to another man.

What a sales pitch! The war though is what all sinners should expect in following Christ. The cost is denying yourself, taking up your cross, and following Jesus. Aching hearts, seasons of loneliness, the world and its temptations telling you that you'll be happier following your desires. But my friend was wrong: true, lasting, eternal joy is found in Jesus. Patience in the suffering is worth it: we have been washed, we are waiting, and Jesus will come through.

So, a practical point here to the church: let's be careful in adding extra weight to the cross of Christ. When people who are gay or same-sex attracted and have chosen to cling to the cross by which the joys of the world are crucified to them, when they are resisting homoerotic desires and practices celebrated all around them, when they are repenting of what their neighbors think is good, when they mortify and kill temptations and let love and community pass them by for the sake of following Jesus, let's be slow in criticizing them. The besetting weakness may endure for some time, without appearance of change or appearance of progression in sanctification. The church should hesitate to prescribe normative timelines, postures, vocabulary, and experiences in the mortification of sin lest additional burdens be heaped upon the cross of Christ.

Let's close by returning by my two opening examples. For the man who wondered if he needed to repent of his same-sex orientation, after clarifying what he meant, I'd tell him that we are totally depraved, and so yes, he needs to repent of his sin nature and shouldn't presume that just because he's not acting on it that his same-sex attraction isn't a source of sinful desires and temptations. I'd also tell them him that he needs to mortify that orientation: resist the temptation. That temptation might never go away, and he doesn't need to repent for the fact that he's being tempted.

For the young boy who comes to me and tells me that he's gay, after listening to figure out what he meant, I'd tell him that it's good thing to have an affinity for other boys, it's good to like them and enjoy being with them. That's a good desire. It's also ok to like and do things that are typically considered girly. He should enjoy his friendships with other boys and other girls. God made sex for marriage, which is between men and women, but he made both boys and girls to be friends with, and he should enjoy those friendships. Maybe one day he'll fall in love with a girl, but maybe not, and in the meantime have good friendships.