

FOREWORD by ROSARIA BUTTERFIELD

HOLY SEXUALITY AND THE GOSPEL

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Sex, Desire, and Relationships
Shaped by God's Grand Story

CHRISTOPHER YUAN



Praise for
Holy Sexuality and the Gospel

“I read a lot of books, and *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel* is on the short-list of most important books I’ve read in the past decade. There’s a desperate need for a biblically astute and theologically grounded yet warm and personal approach to human identity and how it does and doesn’t relate to gender and sexuality. This is that book. *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel* is profoundly relevant in an age of toxic confusion. It should be read by every person questioning their sexual identity as well as by every pastor, parent, friend, or sibling.”

—RANDY ALCORN, author of *Heaven, Happiness, and The Purity Principle* and director of Eternal Perspective Ministries

“A truly breathtaking book that unpacks the *soul* issues of gender. This book not only gets at the heart of sexuality; it gets at the heart of the gospel. Yuan is an insightful thinker and keen storyteller.”

—J. D. GREER, PhD, author of *Not God Enough*, sixty-second president of the Southern Baptist Convention, and pastor of the Summit Church in Raleigh-Durham, NC

“In a world with many opinions surrounding sexuality, Christopher Yuan has given the church and beyond a resource tethered in something much more concrete—that is, the Word of God. And for that reason, I believe this book can lead many into the truth that will set anybody and everybody free.”

—JACKIE HILL-PERRY, poet, speaker, artist, and author of *Gay Girl, Good God: The Story of Who I Was and Who God Has Always Been*

“Dr. Christopher Yuan has done something deeply and desperately needed: he has told the great story of what the Bible says about sexuality—and about same-sex attractions—in a way that neither compromises the truth

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nor the love that is at the heart of that story. God's overwhelming love for us is expressed in his passion for us to be holy even as he is holy. So he never calls us to mere celibacy or mere happiness but to a transcendent holiness and joy. That is the fullness and the glory of walking with the God who died for us—and God forbid that we should settle for anything less.”

—ERIC METAXAS, *New York Times* best-selling author
of *Bonhoeffer: Prophet, Martyr, Pastor, Spy*, and *Martin Luther:
The Man Who Rediscovered God and Changed the World*

“Christopher Yuan is a leader of courage, conviction, and compassion whose life story echoes with amazing grace. This book offers a practical, grounded Christian vision of sexuality in a world culture confused by and obsessed with sex. As the church thinks through how to engage our neighbors on issues such as sexual orientation and gender identity, and on how to disciple our brothers and sisters in Christ who grapple with such temptations, this book will be of immense help.”

—RUSSELL MOORE, PhD, president of the Ethics and Religious
Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention

“What a gift Christopher Yuan is to the body of Christ. His journey into ‘a far country’ and back home into union with Christ has led him to grapple with hard questions we are all asking (or need to be asking) these days about sexuality, identity, sanctification (both the process and the goal), and what it means to mortify sin and wage war against idols of the heart. In his treatment of these important topics, Christopher is at once humble, compassionate, insightful, and unwaveringly committed to holiness, the authority of Scripture, and the glory of God. Penning this book no doubt required intense exertion and great courage. Thank you, Christopher, for being willing to stay the course—for the sake of us all and, preeminently, for Christ’s sake.”

—NANCY DEMOSS WOLGEMUTH, author, teacher, and host
of *Revive Our Hearts*

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“When it comes to sexuality, singleness, and marriage, we need all the good books we can get. And we certainly need this book from Christopher Yuan. *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel* is part biblical exposition, part theological exploration, and part pastoral exhortation. Christopher has given us a clear-eyed and warm-hearted work that will inspire and encourage the weary as well as instruct and (gently) correct those who have been more shaped by the culture than by the way of Christ.”

—KEVIN DEYOUNG, senior pastor of Christ Covenant Church
in Matthews, NC, and assistant professor of systematic theology
at Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte, NC

“I’m so very thankful for Christopher Yuan and his faithfulness in the ministry entrusted to him. I’m grateful that he has become a voice of clarity in the midst of so much theological and sexual confusion. I pray that many will heed his clarion call to a holy sexuality.”

—TIM CHALLIES, blogger, book reviewer, and author of *Do More Better*

“If you’re looking for a book on what the Bible teaches about sexuality, you’ve found a good one—one of the best, in fact, that I’ve read. But this book is so much more. It’s an inspiring call to take up our cross and follow Jesus, who’s worth everything to those he loves. I’m praying that God will raise up an entire generation like Christopher Yuan, who will lead us in courage and compassion so the world might know that Jesus saves.”

—COLLIN HANSEN, editorial director of the Gospel Coalition
and coauthor of *A God-Sized Vision: Revival Stories that Stretch and Stir*

“*Holy Sexuality and the Gospel* is simply remarkable. This book will re-ignite your imagination for the gospel and how the gospel shapes our sexuality. Yuan writes with the pen of a theologian, but he also has the heart of someone who knows this issue from personal experience. This

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book will be required reading for the Transformation Church staff and a resource for our entire church.”

—DERWIN L. GRAY, DMIN, lead pastor of Transformation Church in Fort Mill, SC, and author of *Limitless Life: You Are More Than Your Past When God Holds Your Future*

“*Holy Sexuality and the Gospel* is not just a book; it is a treatise on image-bearing, encompassing all of the facets of being human. The writing is compelling yet grounded biblically and theologically. The subject of human sexuality is confusing and divisive in these days. This is a fresh voice and approach including much research, yet it offers examples of living out the truth both personally and for the community of believers—a way forward toward unity.”

—JO ANNE LYON, general superintendent emerita and ambassador of the Wesleyan Church

“My friend Christopher Yuan has written a book as biblically sound and culturally self-aware as it is pastorally driven. In *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel*, Christopher understands that cultural debates and scriptural debates are driven by even deeper currents: identity and belief. As Christopher writes, ‘The apostle Paul says that in Christ “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Thus, my identity is not gay, ex-gay, or even straight. My *true* identity is in Jesus Christ alone.’ That’s what our society needs to hear. I cannot recommend *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel* highly enough. It is a scandalous book for our age because it calls and draws readers to a bigger horizon than what secularism and theological liberalism offer. The book tackles tough issues ravaging the culture and the local church but does it with a tenor of wisdom and grace.”

—ANDREW T. WALKER, PhD, director of policy studies at the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission and author of *God and the Transgender Debate*

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“Does the Bible have anything to say about sexual orientation? Does God call homosexuals to heterosexuality? What do parents do when their child says ‘I’m gay’? Christopher Yuan has reduced these complex, controversial questions to one simple answer: ‘With same-sex attractions, the problem is sin, and the gospel is the answer.’ Christopher is absolutely right: we are called to holiness, to holy sexuality, to reflecting the image of God in every aspect of our lives. This is a clearly written, biblically grounded, theologically sound exposition. It’s important reading for singles, for married couples, for pastors, and for all those struggling with same-sex attractions.”

—MICHAEL L. BROWN, PhD, host of the *Line of Fire* radio broadcast and author of *Can You Be Gay and Christian?*

“Christopher Yuan’s work tells us that one thing counts most—our identity in Christ and the enablement that comes with it. As he shows, such a focus helps us in all of life, especially in the areas of sexuality, sexual identity, marriage, singleness, and the community that meets needs of intimacy and family. Biblical balance in all of these areas can be a challenge in our culture, especially in knowing how to love and how to converse on these issues. This book does an excellent job of showing the way.”

—DARRELL L. BOCK, PhD, executive director for cultural engagement at the Howard G. Hendricks Center for Christian Leadership and Cultural Engagement and senior research professor of New Testament studies at Dallas Theological Seminary, TX

“Dr. Christopher Yuan combines his own gripping story with astute biblically grounded insights into the whole matter of our true identity and its relation to our sexuality. God has a grand design for human flourishing, and this book presents it so engagingly. Dr. Yuan’s big idea—clearly written and argued—is holy sexuality as a key to human flourishing. The

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tone is gracious throughout, and yet the book is uncompromising in its biblical fidelity. I hope that this work is distributed widely and read deeply.”

—GRAHAM A. COLE, THD, dean and vice president of education
and professor of biblical and systematic theology at Trinity
Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, IL

“*Holy Sexuality and the Gospel* is a book that must be read by every serious Christian. Yuan brings a wonderful balance of biblical insight and practical application for how Christians can thoughtfully address some of the toughest issues of sex and relationships today. And yet his unflinching commitment to the gospel comes through on every page. I could not recommend the book more highly.”

—SEAN McDOWELL, PhD, associate professor of Christian
apologetics at Biola University in La Mirada, CA, speaker,
and coauthor of *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*

“This is a book about sexual sanity, and God knows we need it. Our culture has unhinged sexuality from spiritual and biological realities and loaded it with a weight it is not designed to bear. It was never meant to define us. It cannot make our dreams come true. It will not complete us. As a gift of God kept in perspective, sexuality is wonderful. As an idol, it is terrible. More than ever, we need to know what holy sexuality is.”

—JON BLOOM, author, board chair, and cofounder of Desiring God

“Christopher Yuan pivots from human sexuality to holy sexuality as he writes with passion and compassion, scholarship and spirituality, personal experience and practical expertise.”

—LEITH ANDERSON, DMIN, president of the National Association
of Evangelicals

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Sex, Desire, and Relationships
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HOLY SEXUALITY AND THE GOSPEL

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Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

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For Mom.

Thank you for being my childhood heroine,
for teaching me to be tenacious and never to
settle for mediocrity. Thank you in my adult
years for being a trailblazer, setting true north
on the perfect image of God, who is Christ.
This book on holiness is dedicated to you.

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Foreword

In 2011 Christopher Yuan coauthored with his mother, Angela Yuan, a striking, transparent memoir entitled *Out of a Far Country: A Gay Son's Journey to God, a Broken Mother's Search for Hope*. No memoir has impacted my life more personally.

When this book was published, Christian culture routinely (and robotically) talked about being “delivered out of homosexuality.” In stark contrast, *Out of a Far Country* revealed that Christopher, like all true followers of Jesus Christ, was converted—not out of homosexuality but out of unbelief. Only because the gospel of Jesus Christ changed Christopher from the inside out, making him a new man in Christ, was he able to do what all converts do: kill our idols, including the idol of a sexual sin that has called our names from our earliest memories. That powerful memoir revealed that living like a Christ follower is not a moralistic hack job. It is dying to self so that you can live for Christ. In the very end of this faithful book, Christopher introduced the concept of “holy sexuality,” a concept that changed the paradigm of what it means to live out God’s best for us.

But a memoir is provincial by definition and often leaves the reader with more questions than it offers answers. What is holy sexuality? Isn’t it better to be married than single (even though the Bible says just the opposite)? Isn’t it better to be heterosexual than homosexual (even though the Bible refuses to define personhood in Freudian terms)? Isn’t a Christian delivered out of homosexuality (even though the Bible makes clear that Christians will struggle against all manner of sin in this lifetime and that struggling with Christ’s power to mortify sin and repent of it

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gives glory to God)? In *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel*, Dr. Yuan, in his characteristic warm, engaging, theologically sound, and utterly practical way, offers guidance on these and many other matters.

Since the fall of Adam, the human heart has set itself in defiance against God's authority. This defiance has taken different forms throughout the ages. In the not-so-distant past, we blamed the devil for our sinful sexual passions ("The devil made me do it"). With the onset of the theological negligence of neo-orthodoxy, we have created a generation of Christians who blame the Holy Spirit for their sinful desires ("God made me this way, and it's a proof of good fruit when I act in accordance with my heart's desires"). Thus, from the epoch of late modernity onward, the gospel is on a collision course with the idol of sexual freedom.

This is an issue not only for those who struggle with same-sex attractions or for those who love someone who identifies as LGBTQ. This is an issue for all of us. We all must wage holy war against the idols of our hearts. The idol of our historical epoch is this: your sexual desires define you, determine you, and should always delight you.

Dr. Yuan shows us how deeply dangerous this position is and where it will lead us. He shows how this unbiblical theology weakens our ability to love the Lord, trust his moral law, live in the vitality of the Holy Spirit, and apply the habits of grace needed in times of trial (including the trial of shaking the gates of heaven with prayer for loved ones whose desires of the flesh are clobbering them fast and furiously).

In this light, *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel* helps the reader navigate some of the new vocabulary of the day, introduced after the 2015 Supreme Court case (*Obergefell v. Hodges*) legalized same-sex marriage in all fifty states. He tackles head-on the hardest and most pressing questions: What is wrong with using therapy to "change" sexual orientation? Does sexual orientation reveal who I really am at my deepest core? If I still struggle against same-sex sexual desires, am I a gay Christian? How

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do I love my adult children well who identify as gay and are giving me ultimatums about an upcoming wedding?

Dr. Yuan shows us how to think biblically and act with moral clarity. Christians must deal daily with the original sin that corrupts us, the actual sin that distracts and enlists us, and the indwelling sin that manipulates us. *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel* shows how to use the tools that God has given us to give God glory in our confession and repentance. Christians must learn how to hate our sin without hating ourselves. *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel* shows us how our union with Christ delivers Christ's risen power as we deny our deep desires for the sake of something better.

This book is a tour de force of theological integrity and hope for sexual strugglers and for those who stand beside them. This book never sacrifices sound biblical theology for personal experience, but it also never dismisses the power and importance of personal experience. Every page drips with love for God, love for our neighbors, and love for the church. The love that you find here is vital, biblical love. It's the kind of love the world knows not. I refer here to the Love that came with sacrificial blood, unimaginable pain, heartless betrayal, and eternal joy for those who stand in the risen Christ alone.

Read this book. It will bring biblical clarity, practical theology, pastoral guidance, and personal testimony to bear on this truth of gospel life: that dying to self and living for Christ is hero's work, and with God's help, it is the only way forward for ourselves, our lost loved ones, and our hurting world.

The Bible is the most important book the world has for all generations. The Bible is our guide to faith and life. Nothing can compete with it or improve it. But in Dr. Christopher Yuan's *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel*, you are holding in your hands the most important humanly composed book about biblical sexuality and godly living for our times.

—Rosaria Butterfield

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SHAPED BY GOD'S GRAND STORY

Framing the Conversation with Theology

“I am gay” is a simple statement with a complex and multifaceted meaning. We all know someone who’s gay. You most likely picked up this book because you have a gay child, sibling, coworker, or dear friend.

As a follower of Christ, you recognize that John 3:16—“*For God so loved the world*”—includes this individual. Your love for him or her is not in question. Rather, the question is, What does this love look like?

Many books provide advice for showing compassion to those experiencing same-sex attractions. They offer different and sometimes conflicting approaches on how to do this. Do we help gays and lesbians embrace their sexuality and encourage a modern church “reformation” that affirms same-sex marriage? Do we help heal a torn church by advocating for unity between “affirming” and “nonaffirming” sides?

Do we help gay Christians cultivate deeply spiritual friendships while they accept a stark reality of lifelong celibacy? Do we help those with unwanted same-sex attractions fulfill their heterosexual potential and marry someone of the opposite sex? Or could the gospel be calling us *all* to something costlier but more magnificent than we’ve ever envisioned?

The diverse approaches in these books all begin with a common intent: love. The difference is not just methodology, but it stems from

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varying definitions of *love*. In fact, many well-intentioned pastors who preach fire-and-brimstone sermons against the gay community *believe* they're doing it out of love—albeit a deeply misguided love and a lopsided view of the gospel.

With so many methods, which is the right one? Discerning the correct way to love is not a theoretical exercise. For me, it's deeply personal.

This Is My Song

In 1993 I announced to my parents that I was gay. This led to massive disruption in our family, to put it lightly. Ultimately, this moment became a catalyst that led each of us, one by one, to the Lord.

At the time, my unbelieving mom rejected me. But contrary to the stereotype, after she became a Christian, she knew she could do nothing other than love her gay son as God loved her.

However, with no more secrets, I felt unimpeded to fully embrace “who I was.” This new freedom quickly propelled me down a path of self-destruction that included promiscuity and illicit drug use. Certainly, not all gay men go down this road, but it was my reality. Ultimately, I was expelled from dental school in Louisville, moved to Atlanta, and became a supplier to drug dealers in more than a dozen states.

During this time God graciously worked in the lives of my father and mother and brought them both to a saving trust in Christ. My parents didn't realize the extent of my rebellion, but in the light of their new-found faith, they knew my biggest sin wasn't same-sex sexual behavior; my biggest sin was unbelief. What I needed more than anything else, through God's gift of grace, was faith to believe and follow Jesus.

My mother began to pray a bold prayer: “Lord, do whatever it takes to bring this prodigal son to you.” She didn't pray primarily for me to come home to Chicago or to stop my rebellious behavior. Her main re-

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quest was that God would draw me to himself and that I would fall into his loving arms as his son, adopted and purchased by the blood of the Lamb.

The answer to her prayers came in an unexpected way: I was arrested for drug dealing. In jail, I experienced the darkest moments of my life when I received news that I was HIV positive. That night, as I lay in a prison cell bed, I noticed something scribbled on the metal bunk above me: “If you’re bored, read Jeremiah 29:11.” So I did and was intrigued by the promise I read there: “‘I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.’”

I read the Bible more and more. As I did, I realized I’d placed my identity in the wrong thing. The world tells those of us with same-sex attractions that our sexuality is the core of who we are. But God’s Word paints quite a different picture. Genesis 1:27 informs us that we are all created in the image of God. The apostle Paul says that in Christ “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Thus, my identity is not gay, ex-gay, or even straight. My *true* identity is in Jesus Christ alone.

Ultimately, upon my release from jail, I committed to studying and submitting to biblical and theological truth. I enrolled in Bible college and later, seminary. Over time, God has given back the years the locusts had taken away (Joel 2:25). My parents and I now travel around the world as a two-generational ministry, communicating God’s grace and God’s truth on biblical sexuality.

Meaning to Method

Through my journey from agnostic gay man to evangelical Bible professor, I’ve come to realize that the differences in how people respond to gay and same-sex-attracted individuals are rooted in *meaning*. From

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ancient times, humanity has been pursuing meaning. And out of meaning flow actions.

Our divergent approaches on how to love the gay community—stemming from competing interpretations of meaning—can be overwhelming and confusing. Clarity comes not by trying to decide which approach is more compassionate but by observing which approach is grounded in the correct version of truth—God's truth. With good intentions, we may rush into doing "what's right," but if we don't begin with *right thinking*, there's a good chance we could be doing what's wrong.

Both compassion and wisdom are virtues. But compassion without wisdom can be careless, even reckless. Wisdom without compassion is useless, even pharisaical. True compassion flows from wisdom, and true wisdom results in compassion—there should be no dichotomy. The real Christian life is built on godly wisdom.

We're often encouraged in our society to embrace relevance and pragmatism at the expense of truth. But correct practice flows from correct truth. We must resist the natural impulse to disjoin practice from truth or truth from practice.

Certainly, there's great importance in exploring the ethics of same-sex relationships, and many scholars have written about the key Old and New Testament passages prohibiting same-sex sexual practice. This work is vital, and several books have done it well.¹

However, we limit ourselves if we think that "right knowing" simply means studying a handful of biblical texts relevant to the topic at hand. This would be missing the forest for the trees. A robust theology cannot be built on what we're *not* allowed to do, for the Christian life is much more than the avoidance of sinful behavior. If scriptural prohibitions are the only lens through which we see things, then we may well miss the gospel.

My goal for this book is to provide both theological reflection on sexuality and practical action points for those of us trying to share Christ with our gay loved ones through the lens of God's grand story—creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. You may be thinking, *I'm no theologian!* but the Greek word *theologia* literally means “knowledge of God.” Do you have any knowledge of God? If so, you're a theologian!

Kevin Zuber, a professor of mine in Bible college, deeply impacted me when he challenged the class to think about theology as a verb. Christians are supposed to *do* theology. Theology *done* well engages heart, mind, and hands. Anemic theology breeds apathy, but good theology compels action.

Even still, you may be thinking, *What I need right now is not theology but practical advice on how to better minister to my gay loved ones and friends.* Yet how can we know what God wants for our gay friends without ample knowledge of God? Thoughts precede action.

Good theology, right action. Bad theology, wrong action.

Breaking Bad Paradigms

In 2011 I coauthored a book with my mother, Angela, entitled *Out of a Far Country: A Gay Son's Journey to God, a Broken Mother's Search for Hope*.² Toward the end of our memoir, I briefly introduced the concept of *holy sexuality*.

The impetus for this new phrase stemmed from my frustration with the heterosexual-bisexual-homosexual paradigm, particularly its incongruence with biblical and theological truth. I knew that at some point I needed to flesh out this important biblical definition of *holy sexuality*.

Over the years, I came to understand that the goal of holy sexuality is not just for those who experience attractions toward people of the same

sex; holy sexuality is for everyone. This understanding of sexuality is tethered to God's grand story—creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. This full-orbed, coherent theological framework helps us better and more fully comprehend human sexuality in light of God's revealed truth.

Will you join me on a journey as we investigate a theology of sexuality? As we go, be prepared to think biblically, theologically, and critically; to challenge some of our old human-made paradigms not grounded in Scripture; and, in some situations, to change and realign to God's truth.

As always, don't resist the Holy Spirit as he convicts us of wrong thinking and even as he grants us the gracious gift of repentance. Get ready for us to deepen our knowledge of God and his grand story, which will then rightly shape our understanding of human sexuality.

Are you ready?

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A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY

Is Sexuality Who We Really Are?

“This is who I am.” The words were spoken by Andy, one of my classmates from seminary. He and I and another friend occasionally debated Bible passages after class—just for fun. Andy was a bright young man, raised on the mission field, and married to a godly young lady. So I was surprised when I heard that Andy had come out of the closet and was no longer living with his wife. It had been his secret, and many close to him felt blindsided by the news.

As we got together to discuss the Bible that week, our dialogue inevitably turned to texts related to homosexuality. It became apparent as we talked that a shift in Andy’s hermeneutics had occurred. His flippant dismissal of biblical authors as ignorant or simply uninformed gave evidence that he had changed his views regarding biblical authority and inerrancy.

We’d been challenging each other for about an hour when Andy suddenly thrust our conversation in a different direction entirely, from theoretical to intensely personal: “Why would God make me this way and then not allow me to be who I am? For years, I prayed for God to take this away and change me. Nothing happened, and nothing will. I’ve been

denying this for far too long. I never chose this. I just have to be honest and authentic and accept the truth that I'm gay. This is who I am."

At that point, I knew from personal experience that the issue went beyond Andy's incorrect interpretations of Bible passages relating to same-sex relationships. It was more profound than simply bad exegesis or a low view of Scripture. Andy's words revealed a deeper philosophical and theological misunderstanding, a faulty presupposition that pointed to his essence, to the core of his being: *This is who I am*.

Being gay is no longer what I'm attracted to, what I desire, or what I do—it's *who I am*. Matthew Vines, a gay activist, writes that sexual attraction "is simply part of who you are" and "as humans, our sexuality is a core part of who we are."¹ In the conversation around sexuality, this subtle shift from *what* to *who* has created a radically distorted view of personhood.²

There is no other sin issue so closely linked to identity. For example, being a gossip is not who he is but what he does. Or being an adulteress is not who she is but what she does. Being a hater is not who he is but what he does. Should the capacity for same-sex attractions really describe who I am at my most basic level? Or should it describe *how* I am? Might this be a categorical fallacy that ultimately distorts how we think and live? The terms *heterosexual* and *homosexual* turn desire into personhood, experience into ontology.

My friend Andy's statement, which is similar to that of many gays and lesbians, brings to the forefront an age-old question: *Who am I?* From Plato to Descartes, from Kant to Foucault, philosophers throughout history have attempted to shed light on this profound mystery.

Philosophers aren't the only ones who've asked that question. We've all asked it. During puberty, teenagers especially struggle with their identity, and middle-aged adults commonly question their existence and meaning. For many, the search for identity can last a lifetime.

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For some, self-identity is shaped by family, friends, and culture. Others find their identity in work, in sports or hobbies, or in the latest trending activism. Some find their sole identity in being a parent. Still others, as we know, find their identity in their sexuality.

Do these substitutes for identity truly describe who we are or only what we do or experience? And specifically, does sexuality describe *who* we are or does it really explain *how* we are? Our answers to these questions affect many facets of our lives. It impacts the way we think, the choices we make, and the relationships we build.

All our thoughts and actions are influenced at some level by how we answer the question *Who am I?* This suggests a closer relationship between *essence* and *ethics* than many realize. The two inform each other. Who we are (essence) determines how we live (ethics), and how we live determines who we are.³

If we have a flawed view of who we are, we'll have a flawed personal ethic, and if we have a flawed personal ethic, we'll have a flawed view of who we are. Personhood affects practice, and practice affects personhood.

When I came out in my early twenties, I believed the only way to live authentically as a gay man was to fully embrace that identity. Being gay was who I was. As a matter of fact, my whole world was gay. Almost everyone I knew was gay.

All my friends were gay. My neighbors were gay. My apartment manager was gay. My barber was gay. My house cleaner was gay. My bookkeeper was gay. My car salesman was gay. I worked out at a gay gym and bought groceries at the gay Kroger.

Sexuality was the core of who I was, and everything and everyone around me affirmed that. And if *I am gay* truly means that's *who I am*, it would be utterly cruel for someone to condemn me for simply being myself.

Yet we know that we are created in God's image (Genesis 1:27).

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Thus, rejecting our inherent essence and replacing it simply with what we feel or do is in reality an attempted coup d'état against our Creator. We don't need to find our identity; our identity is given by God.⁴

But why isn't this apparent to everyone? What causes our gay loved ones to be so easily misled? Why does my gay Christian friend identify more with being gay than being Christian? Where and when did this incorrect perspective originate? How did *what I do* and *what I feel* become *who I am*? Or, to put it another way, how did "This is *how* I am" become "This is *who* I am"?

Potential and Peril

Prior to the mid-1800s, sexuality was understood strictly as behavior, not identity. No word existed to describe an individual with same-sex attractions. Sigmund Freud and his contemporaries were the first to introduce terms to categorize people according to their sexual attractions—*heterosexual* and *homosexual*.

In 1870 German psychiatrist Carl Westphal was the earliest to utilize *homosexuality* as a way to characterize a person's nature, not just his sexual practice.⁵ German psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing wrote one of the first works on sexual pathology and homosexuality, published in 1886.⁶ The popularity of Krafft-Ebing's book made the words he used in it to describe sexual orientation—*heterosexual* and *homosexual*—more mainstream.

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) had an immense impact on the discussion of homosexuality and sexual orientation. Freud's most important articles on homosexuality were written between 1905 and 1922. Unlike his peers, he viewed homosexuality not as a sickness but as an inversion. Homosexual was just another variety of humanity. Thus, heterosexual and homosexual became new, secular categories for personhood.

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This concept of identity, based on feelings and behavior, blossomed in the fertile soil of burgeoning secular philosophies. Europe in the 1800s had experienced a movement within art, literature, music, and academic thought known as Romanticism. Reacting to the rationalism⁷ of the Enlightenment as well as the herd mentality of the Industrial Revolution, Romanticism extolled emotions and individualism.

It revered senses over intellect, emotions over reason. A key component of Romanticism was the assumption that humans are inherently good, and if humans are inherently good, then human emotions (feelings, affections, desires, etc.) are also inherently good.

Along with Romanticism, the philosophy of *existentialism* was a rising force in Europe, placing priority on freedom and a strong emphasis on living, acting, and feeling. Existentialism's highest virtue was authenticity.

Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55), generally regarded as the first existentialist thinker, believed that truth could be discovered only subjectively via one's actions and that, from those actions, each individual had the difficult but essential duty of finding meaning and creating value and personal identity.

Taken to its end, existentialism inevitably led to *nihilism*—the idea that life has no inherent meaning or value. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), best known for his audacious claim that “God is dead,” railed against Christianity. He believed the individual must break free from the moral constraints of society (particularly religion) to create oneself anew.

And why not? Without any intrinsic value or objective meaning in life, the individual must reevaluate existence and courageously live according to his or her own desires. If there's no God, there's no essence; identity must be created by each person. And if there's no essence—only existence—then ethics has no mooring and must also be created.

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The strong influence of these philosophies and movements on Western culture produced a vacuum. In the absence of any objective foundation for true identity, experience essentially became God. Experience reigned supreme, and everything else had to bow before it. *Sola experientia* (“experience alone”) won out over *sola Scriptura* (“Scripture alone”). In such a climate, the idea that sexuality represents our core identity quickly took root.

I know firsthand how easy it is to allow emotions and desires to become the bedrock of who I am, just as my friend Andy had thoroughly convinced himself after years of inner struggle that no other explanation existed. His experience had subsumed personhood; *what I feel* had become *who I am*.

Know Thyself

In the face of today’s widespread belief that experience supersedes essence, the correct way for Christians to comprehend identity—particularly as it relates to sexuality—is to better grasp who we are in light of God’s truth. True identity is not *what* I do (for example, I am a writer). Nor is it *how* I am (for example, I am happy). True identity is *who* I am. In other words, identity in Christ means union with Christ.

We cannot properly understand human sexuality unless we begin with *theological anthropology*. Anthropology, in general terms, is the study of humanity. Essentially, it’s the human search to answer the important question, Who am I?

Most anthropologists begin with the incorrect premise that there is no God. But an incorrect premise obscures the truth, resulting in conclusions that are intrinsically limited at best or completely mistaken and deceiving at worst. A true, faithful, and accurate anthropology begins with God.

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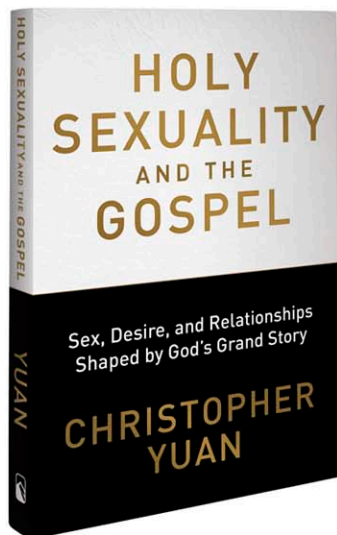
The reformer John Calvin articulated this profound truth: “Man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God’s face.”⁸ When secular researchers reject the supernatural, it’s no surprise that they also disregard the possibility of *purpose* behind the origin of human beings. Christians know there *is* a God who lovingly and intentionally created us for a purpose.

We begin with a completely theocentric, or God-centered, view of humankind—that we’re all created in the image of God (Genesis 1) but also distorted by sin because of the Fall (Genesis 3). Only then are we able to understand our desires, submit to Christ, and live according to God’s will.

Who am I? Who are you? Who are they? Who are we? The answer begins with the image of God and the doctrine of sin.

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