



## **Orthodoxy and Same Sex Attraction**

Source: [Pithless Thoughts](#)



Becky had become a born-again Christian only months before at an emotionally charged youth rally. She sat at my dining room table and poured out her past. Gay bars, her “butch” persona, her last relationship that she broke off. Now, like Lot’s wife, she was looking back longingly to that past, because she wasn’t finding emotional fulfillment and support in the church’s fellowship.

Paul was popular, a fraternity leader, a seminarian. He was found with another young man in his dorm room. He poured out his heart as the college’s administration met to decide what to do with him. He felt his life was over; he was contemplating suicide.

William was a leader in the youth group. He and another young man in the youth group were discovered in bed together at a retreat. As the associate pastor in charge of youth, I chaired the meeting with the parents and their kids to discuss the issue.

I hired Joe as a drywall helper and we quickly became best friends. He began to confide in me about his past of horrific sexual abuse by his adoptive family, and his life in Hollywood as a male prostitute for drug money. I eventually baptized him in my former Protestant church. Three years later he died of a drug overdose.

These are a few stories from homosexuals I have counseled over the past 35 years, first as a Protestant Christian and now as an Orthodox Christian. The Orthodox Church’s spirituality both affirmed and challenged my thinking about homosexuality over the years. This article is based on these experiences. As



part of my exploration of how Orthodoxy has actually affected the lives of people living with same-sex attraction issues, several converts to Orthodoxy agreed to participate anonymously in interviews about their struggles with same-sex attraction (SSA) for this article.

What's in a Name?

When I met Joe, his very first words to me were, “I hate Jesus Christ and I hate Christians.” After learning what he had endured in the minister’s family that adopted him, I could not blame him. After becoming a Christian, he wrestled with his identity in Christ. He said he had a hard time with the Christian attitude that, “If you have sex with several people of the opposite sex you simply sinned, but if you give oral sex to one man you are a fag forever.” He never escaped the label, even in Christ, and I believe he died a “fag” in his own mind.

What do we call people who are attracted to the same sex? What we call ourselves or someone else can define the human being in a way that denies basic Christian dogma about our personhood. Carol succinctly summed up the Orthodox view in our interview: “I am not my sin.”

The Christian faith teaches us that we are all created in the image of God. The Fathers teach that the image may be marred, corroded, covered, but it is never lost. While those in the world may lay claim to their sin as a label or a badge, those who are Christians are not labeled with their sin, but are merely Christ-ians: in the image of Christ. We either bear the name of Christ, or we bear the name of our sins. St. Paul says no “fornicators, idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God, and such were some of you but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of God” (1 Cor. 6:9-11 NASV).

When we enter the arena of the Church and the struggle against sin, we are no longer labeled with our sin. This is true of heterosexual sin, homosexual sin, or any other sin. We are not defined by the gender of the person for whom we have a sexual desire, but by Christ. The Church is only concerned with who you are becoming in Christ through the practice of the virtues, regardless of your besetting sin.



Almost all the people interviewed commented that this revelation was one of the most comforting aspects of the Orthodox faith. Their struggle is against sin, not against their humanity. Andrew said, “Being gay is not a ‘struggle’. It’s a struggle to see yourself as worthy of love and respect; from yourself, from other people, and especially from the church. And it’s a struggle to decide how to live your life. My struggles arise from this — how to appropriately express, or not express, my sexuality.” He said these are the same “struggles” all people have, no matter what their sexual orientation, and in this sense being “gay” or “straight” makes no difference.

Many Orthodox Christians prefer to call the issue “same-sex attraction” (SSA), which defines the temptation and not the person.

The Origins of SSA

Joe was sexually abused by foster parents, then by his adoptive mother, his brothers, his cousins, and physically abused by his adoptive father. Carol was physically abused from infancy, then repeatedly raped from age seven. Gregory’s father traveled a lot on business. He was raised by his mother, who let him dress in women’s clothes and collect Barbie dolls, which upset his father. Gregory’s mother was raised by a father who she discovered was homosexual when she was about forty years old; her mother had died as an alcoholic. The pieces of her own family dysfunctions fell into place long after she had realized Gregory was “gay.” Michael’s family was a “normal” Christian family, but he knew there were several members of his extended family who were gay.

These stories are classic scenarios for producing people with SSA issues. However, research has shown that no childhood events are infallible predictors of SSA. Because of this, some propose that SSA is a genetic predisposition or irresistible trait. All of the respondents to my survey were aware of their SSA early in life, but there was not unanimity among them regarding the “nature/nurture” question. Some believe it is nature, some nurture, some think it is a little of both.

The Christian faith does not give us a definitive answer in the “nature/nurture” debate on any human



frailty. Genetically caused disabilities are as much a trait of the fallen world as weaknesses visited upon us by lack of nurture and love. The issue for the Christian is the fact that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). What is the “glory of God”? It is living in perfect love and communion with God and other human beings.

But we don't live in perfect love; we are born into corruption, futility, and death. We are conceived by fallen flesh and born into a fallen world. We are dealt a set of fallen DNA from conception. The moment we leave the womb, we are placed in the arms of a broken person, then taken home to a place where broken people are working out their salvation with fear and trembling at best, or with no fear of God at worst. From our first interactions, we are mishandled, neglected, and broken in ways we did not choose and often cannot consciously identify. The sins of the fathers are visited upon the following generations, not as punishment but as inevitable consequence. We are all broken.

What does this mean in terms of SSA? We all grow up fractured and broken. We grow up with a warfare within us that we did not choose, but which was given to us. We do not get to choose our parents and their limitations. We do not choose our physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual broken places any more than we get to choose being born with a big nose, an aptitude for math, a susceptibility to heart disease, or a gross deformity. We don't get to pick a lot of our struggles. Ultimately, we work out our salvation with and through our unique array of genetic traits, attributes, and emotionally and spiritually damaged humanity.

What Do You Want Me to Do for You?

“What do you want Me to do for you?” Jesus asked blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:51). This is a simple question: What do we want from relationships? Joe learned to equate sex with connection or “communion” with other human beings. Gregory is attracted to strong men. He knows he is filling his father's void in his heart. Carol was abused by men and just says, “Is it any wonder I find emotional and physical connections with women more comfortable?”

People with SSA are seeking the same thing every human being is desperate for: intimacy, unconditional acceptance, to love and be loved. This is not only about SSA. The loneliness and despair of the rejected,



ugly, shy, socially inept, and sick are as hellish as the loneliness of the person with SSA. The more introspective people I've talked to about SSA say it is not about the sex; it is about emotional attachment, the feeling of being connected intimately to another human being. I've heard the same thing from heterosexual people who have committed adultery and fornication. The intense emotions of a relationship are like drugs. They are powerfully addicting. Relationships often become obsessions, and people will sacrifice everything they have for them. As important as the emotional aspects are, sex always enters the relationship. Why do potentially intimate and godly friendships between any genders often get sexualized?

First, we must remember that sex in and of itself is not evil. While it is a God-given, powerful, and unitive act between two human beings, it is neither necessary for human wholeness and intimate relationships, nor is it a "God-given right." Our sexuality is natural to our human bodies, like eating and drinking. What is not natural is for us to wantonly use gratification of our fleshly desires to try to fill a spiritual void. Indeed, people can degenerate into a sexual life that is at the level of the animal passions, where human beings become mere objects of lust. Fasting teaches us we are not ruled by our bellies. Abstinence teaches us we are not ruled by our genitals, in spite of what our culture says.

Obsession with sex is the signpost for our culture's existential descent into loneliness, isolation, and despair. We settle for pleasure over joy, emotion over intimacy, feelings over love, and copulation over union. The delusion is powerful. To paraphrase a Woody Allen quip, "Sex without love is an empty and hollow experience, but as empty, hollow experiences go, it's one of the best."

When damaged human beings are incapable of godly intimacy and joy with another human being, we often resort to sexual pleasure with another at best, or at the expense of another at worst, as a way to connect. The issue for the Christian is that we exchange our personhood, as defined by the image of God who is Love, for an identity as a biological creature, defined by whom we have an orgasm with in order to feel good. It is "exchanging the truth of God for the lie, and worshipping and serving the creature rather than the Creator" (Rom. 1:25).

To Change or Not to Change

When I asked, "Do you think homosexuals can change?" all but one of the people interviewed said, "No."



The sole dissenter said, “I don’t know, God knows.” This was not the response I was anticipating.

All of these people related having problems with how SSA was approached in their former traditions, whether it was “God made you this way, so it is OK, just go with it”; or “all fags are going to hell”; or “homosexuals need to change into heterosexuals.” There was a wholesale rejection of their former traditions and current Protestant approaches.

Regarding the Christian organizations that promote “change therapies,” Michael said the Protestant group he was in was “counterproductive, actually. For the promise was to ‘change,’ which didn’t happen — not even close, which only added to the general hopelessness.” He said that the “drop-dead gorgeous” leader of the group eventually ran off with one of the members and is now living an openly gay lifestyle, a danger Carol noted about “support groups.”

Andrew vehemently stated, “Those organizations are dangerous. . . . Anyone who would send their children to those people should be ashamed of themselves, churches included. They should have the millstones put around their necks and be thrown into the sea.”

One might think this notion of inability to change is a sign of hopelessness and resignation. To the contrary, it was unanimously a comfort and hope to all the people I interviewed, because it placed the battle where it really belongs: against the sin, and not against themselves. And the warfare against sin is indeed a battle. Joseph said, “The discipline of Orthodoxy is essential. In time, old patterns of behavior fade, and new patterns become normative. But then you run into an old temptation face-to-face and the struggle seems as fresh as ever.”

George, an 80-year-old man who has not had a relationship in over 50 years, still has thoughts and desires that assault him. Andrew mentioned an icon of St. Anthony that said, “Expect temptation until your last breath.” As with all sin, constant vigilance is needed to escape falling.



I was talking with a young man one day about SSA and the Orthodox view of celibacy and virginity. He said, “So what you are saying is, if I become Orthodox I am doomed to celibacy.” Of course the answer is yes, but the “yes” is not a bitter pill if we understand the nature of the medicine.

First, love does not require sex. As godly as it is, sex and sexuality are not the foundations for any relationship. There is a higher union between human beings than mutual orgasms. Sex may fulfill and enhance a particular relationship, but it is not essential for any relationship. Personhood ultimately revolves around who we are in godly union with another human being of any gender. The joy of Trinitarian intimacy comes when we struggle against sin in order to define ourselves in Christ rather than in another human being’s arms, no matter how comfortable and affirming the experience feels to our deluded and shattered hearts.

Second, “doomed” is a strong word. It implies a living hell, torment and despair. As flippant as this may sound, living without sex is not doom. People with SSA are not the only people in the world “doomed” to abstinence as a lifestyle against their choice and desires. Having the possibility of a committed monogamous relationship because one is heterosexual is not a guarantee that one will actually have such a relationship. And having a heterosexual monogamous relationship is not a guaranteed wall against temptation, lust, and overt sin. Choices still exist, ungodly desires still run rampant, and one can wither away in loneliness and despair even in the context of a God-ordained heterosexual marriage.

Third, neither is celibacy hell. In fact, in 1 Corinthians 7 it is set forth as the “Cadillac” of vehicles to virtue and service to God. In Protestant churches, the singles ministries attest to the prevailing attitude that there is something “wrong” with a Christian who embraces the single life. But biblically, celibacy does not imply living without deep friendships, intimacy, and love. In fact, it implies learning to be intimate and to love as Christ Himself loved — as a celibate human being. It may not be a spiritual discipline we would have chosen from the cosmic menu if given the choice, but it is indeed one that all Christians may, at one time or another or even permanently, have to embrace for the sake of the Kingdom.

Carol observed that even married people are called to self-control. Andrew stated that living without sex may be difficult to accept, hard to do, a bleak prospect, an unfulfilled desire, but it is possible and it is far from “doom.” Monasticism is an option all have considered, but they know that it is not a “cure” for SSA any more than for any other sin.





Gregory said he would never confess to a priest he heard using the pulpit to “rant” about homosexuals. Andrew does confession with his parish priest, but not about his SSA issues. He sees a nun for that. He said if his priest asked, he would admit it, but he is not going to volunteer it. In spite of the discomfort and fears, all of the people I interviewed had a trusted spiritual director. Some were parish priests, some nuns, some lay spiritual directors. Establishing this relationship is a risky step for the person with SSA, and one that is understandably fearful.

It is clear that all priests are not created equal, and some may not be able to deal with SSA issues due to their own weaknesses. Clergy must assume that if someone with SSA issues is attending their parish, they are there to be saved; otherwise they would be going somewhere else. As Andrew said, “I don’t plan to march around church waving rainbow banners or anything. I’m not here to make political statements or change social policy. I just want to be a respected member of the parish.” The person with SSA is wary and discerning, and clergy who assume a pastoral stance regarding SSA in private conversations and sermons are trusted. None of the people interviewed cared whether their spiritual director had SSA or not. The only thing that mattered was their acceptance of them as persons and their spiritual advice.

The Church

I asked if anyone felt it necessary to “come out” to their church. No one I interviewed felt the need to or saw any wisdom in “coming out” to their entire parish, and in fact saw that as unwise and ill-advised. On the other hand, when I asked if they feared being “outed,” none of them were concerned about it.

I asked, “How can the church help people with SSA?” because ultimately the burden for healing SSA does not fall only on the clergy, but on the whole church. Andrew stated, “I really haven’t thought about how the parish could ‘help’ a gay person. I’d just want my fellow parishioners to not think any differently of me. Treat me the same as when you thought I was straight. They have known me for ten years. I am active in serving my parish. What could they say to me at this point?”



Gregory issued this challenge: “In our pre-communion prayers we all confess that we are ‘the chief of sinners.’ No one should look at another person as if they stand on moral high ground.”

I believe the message is clear. We need to adopt the attitude that we all stand at the foot of the cross in need of mercy. The Church is the Body of Christ and should be the place where the pure love of God that knows no respect of persons is found. No matter what passion someone is struggling with, we need to be the Church, the hospital for sinners, the place where we can be healed, find acceptance and relationships that draw us closer to God through love and compassion.

When all is said and done, the basic human issue we all face is loneliness and alienation. Loneliness is not a function of sexuality, but of sin. The cure for our alienation is in Christ, in His Body, the Church. The Church needs to be the Church: the place where humble love embraces the sick, the suffering, the emotionally, spiritually, and physically deformed, the outcast, the least, the lost and the lonely. In this embrace it teaches the meaning of God’s love, which transcends and heals all the ravages of sin visited on the human being, including same-sex attraction.

(Names and historical details have been changed in order to protect the identity of the people mentioned in this article.)

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