

Orientation as Ontology: A Theological Critique

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Abstract

Over the last 10 years, the development of “Side B” as a more distinct theological perspective on same-sex desires has sparked an ongoing debate within conservative evangelicalism around the intersection of sexuality and identity. However, much of the recent debate has focused on the language that Christians with same-sex desires might use to describe themselves (i.e., gay Christian, same-sex attracted, etc.).

While important, far less of the debate has centered on challenging the category of sexual orientation itself. Authors such as Jenell Williams Paris, Michael W. Hannon, Christopher Yuan, and Rosaria Butterfield have primarily critiqued the idea of sexual orientation ontology (SOO) from a historical, philosophical, and pastoral perspective. While biblical and theological arguments have featured in their critiques to some extent, it remains an underdeveloped area.

Using Ryan Peterson’s framework of created and constructed identities, I explore whether sexual orientation can be a biblically justifiable form of ontology (regardless of whether it is heterosexual or homosexual in nature). Based on common definitions of sexual orientation and what Scripture says concerning marriage, desire, and identity, sexual orientation as an ontological category of humanity appears to be incompatible with biblical anthropology and theology.

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Introduction

Gay, straight, lesbian, bisexual, queer, pansexual, demisexual—such words describing sexual orientation have become commonplace in our culture, and the list of sexual identities keeps growing.¹ The common perception in our culture is that sexual orientation is an ontology: a state of being, a selfhood, an identity, and an essential part of what makes us human. In other words, who you are sexually attracted to defines who you are.²

This sexual orientation ontology (SOO) has largely been adopted in the Church, having gone unnoticed and unchallenged for many decades. However, within the last 10 years, the development of “Side B”³ as a more distinct theological perspective on same-sex desires as well as the launching of the Revoice Conference in 2018 has sparked an ongoing debate amongst a group of both Protestant and Catholic scholars about the nature of sexual orientation and its place in the Christian life. Thus far, much of the public debate has centered around the language of sexual orientation and its relationship to Christian identity. Should a Christian describe themselves as gay, queer, same-sex-attracted, etc.? While valuable, this discussion doesn’t

¹ Mere Abrams, “46 Terms That Describe Sexual Attraction, Behavior, and Orientation,” *Healthline*, December 10, 2019, accessed March 12, 2022, <https://www.healthline.com/health/different-types-of-sexuality>.

² While the term “sexual orientation” can incorporate other aspects like emotional and romantic attraction, social identity, and behaviors (see, for example, The American Psychological Association, *Answers to Your Questions: For a Better Understanding of Sexual Orientation & Homosexuality* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2008), accessed March 12, 2022, <https://www.apa.org/topics/lgbtq/orientation.pdf>), I will be addressing sexual orientation in its simplest and most widely understood form as “the direction in one’s sexual attractions toward the same, or opposite sex, or both.” (Mark A. Yarhouse and Erica S.N. Tan, *Sexual Identity Synthesis: Attributions, Meaning-Making, and the Search for Congruence* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004), 3.)

³ In the early 2000s, the language of “Side A” and “Side B” emerged in the Gay Christian Network as broad categories to distinguish the beliefs of Christians with same-sex sexual attractions. Side A believed that the Bible affirms monogamous same-sex relationships (thus rejecting traditional biblical sexual ethics) whereas side B affirmed that marriage and sexuality were to be between one man and one woman. Over the 2010s (starting with the publication and popularity of Wesley Hill’s book *Washed and Waiting* in 2010, in which he used the term ‘celibate gay Christian’), discussions surrounding language, identity, and sexuality began to be deliberated more broadly within the Christian community. Side B began to take on a more distinct theological flavor of embracing sexual identity labels to describe one’s experience, social identity, and even ontology (for some) while also rejecting the explicitly sinful (i.e., homoerotic) behaviors and desires of the flesh. Needless to say, side B has aroused controversy and continues to do so to this day.

address the more fundamental question about whether sexual orientation is a category or ontology which aligns with a biblical anthropology.

Authors who have addressed this topic have primarily critiqued the idea of SOO from a historical, philosophical, and pastoral perspective. While biblical and theological arguments have featured in their critiques to some extent, it remains an underdeveloped area.

In this paper, I will first give a brief history of SOO within Western civilization. Then, I will summarize recent critiques of SOO. Third, I will apply Ryan Peterson's framework of created and constructed identities to argue that sexual orientation (as it is commonly defined) cannot be a biblically justified human ontology (regardless of whether it is heterosexual or homosexual in nature). Lastly, I will offer some discussion and reflection on the above material.

A Brief History of Sexual Orientation Ontology

The world has always known of people with various sexual proclivities and desires towards the opposite sex, the same sex, or both sexes. Yet, for most of the history of Western civilization, sexuality was predominantly viewed as something you did, not something you are.

Michele Foucault, a French philosopher and historian, wrote his multi-volume *History of Sexuality*, which has become one of the most influential texts on this issue. In it, he discusses how terms like “homosexual” and “heterosexual” are “plainly inadequate” when we look at how ancient Greeks conceived of sexuality.⁴ The Greeks viewed a person as having the capacity for erotic interaction with the beauty of either sex. As far as sexual ethics goes, Greeks were far more concerned with sexual moderation (as opposed to excess) and proper social status differentiation in sexual interaction.⁵ Ancient Rome also held similar attitudes.⁶

Even as Christianity became the dominant political reality and laws against sodomy began to multiply during the Middle Ages, sexuality was still conceived of in terms of *acts*, not ontology. Brent Pickett comments that the term sodomite “differs from the contemporary idea of ‘homosexual’. A sodomite was understood as act-defined, rather than as a type of person. Someone who had desires to engage in sodomy, yet did not act upon them, was not a sodomite.”⁷ This act-defined framework remained unchanged throughout Western civilization for centuries, including early colonial America and into the mid-nineteenth century.

Jonathan Ned Katz, in his book *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, notes that the predominant ethic surrounding sexual activity was based on a “reproductive imperative.”⁸

⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 187.

⁵ Brent Pickett, "Homosexuality", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2021 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, accessed March 13, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/homosexuality>.

⁶ Pickett, "Homosexuality."

⁷ Pickett, "Homosexuality".

⁸ Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 37.

Having children was seen as both a moral and societal good. Laws often criminalized sexual behavior not geared towards the end of procreation. This not only included same-sex sexual actions, but opposite-sex actions like adultery, or solo actions like masturbation. As Katz notes, “The operative contrast in this society was between fruitfulness and barrenness, not between different-sex and same-sex eroticism.”⁹ Based on this reproductive imperative, society continued to view sexuality as act-defined. Katz summarizes:

As a universal temptation, not a minority impulse, a man’s erotic desire for another man did not constitute him as a particular kind of person, a buggerer or sodomite. Individuals might lust consistently toward one sex or another and be recognized, sometimes, as so lusting. But this society did not give rise to a subject defined essentially by an attraction to a same sex or an appetite for a different sex.¹⁰

However, this began to change towards the latter half of the nineteenth century for many reasons. First, the medicalization and scientific analysis of sexuality through psychology and other fields gave rise to new linguistic categories. The terms “homosexuality” and “heterosexuality” were coined by a German writer and early sex-reformer named Karl Maria Kertbeny. They first appeared in print in 1869 and 1880 respectively.¹¹ Both “heterosexuality” and “homosexuality” were first used to describe various deviant sexual behaviors as a pathology.¹² Along with the medical and scientific investigation into sexuality, heterosexuals and homosexuals took on “an entire physical and mental makeup.”¹³ In an oft-quoted passage from Foucault, he encapsulates this historic transition this way:

As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total

⁹ Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, 38.

¹⁰ Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, 38-39.

¹¹ Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, 53-54.

¹² Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, 19-23; Pickett, “Homosexuality”.

¹³ Pickett, “Homosexuality”.

composition was unaffected by his sexuality ... The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.¹⁴

Slowly, but surely, ontology was creeping into sexuality. Homosexual and heterosexual acts were becoming homosexual and heterosexual people. And it was the invention of this language that, in part, enabled this. By becoming test subjects in scientific explorations, people *with* patterns of sexual desires became *defined by* those patterns of sexual desires.

Furthermore, in the 1890s, a second shift began to happen: the reproductive imperative of sexuality began to be replaced by a “different-sex pleasure ethic.”¹⁵ A widely influential book was published in 1893 in English by Richard von Krafft-Ebing, a professor of psychiatry and neurology at the University of Vienna. The book was entitled *Psychopathia Sexualis, with Especial Reference to Contrary Sexual Instinct: A Medico-Legal Study*. His book introduced the term “hetero-sexual” to many Americans. His usage of the term hetero-sexual “spliced sex-difference and eroticism to constitute a pleasure defined explicitly by the different sex of its parties,”¹⁶ thus creating a new “normal different-sex eroticism”¹⁷—the beginning of what we might call an orientation. Katz explains,

His use of the terms hetero-sexual and homo-sexual helped to make sex difference and eros the basic distinguishing features of a new linguistic, conceptual, and social ordering of desire. His hetero-sexual and homo-sexual offered the modern world two sex-differentiated eroticisms, one normal and good, one abnormal and bad, a division which would come to dominate our twentieth-century vision of the sexual universe.¹⁸

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 43.

¹⁵ Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, 19.

¹⁶ Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, 22.

¹⁷ Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, 23.

¹⁸ Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, 28.

Thus, disconnecting sexual activity from procreation and shifting to an ethic of pleasure would come to drastically change our society's understanding of the nature and ethics of sexual desire itself.

Of course, it would take decades, and the work of other influential thinkers like Sigmund Freud, for these ideas to sink into the culture and solidify. By the time we arrive in the latter half of the twentieth century, this idea of a normative heterosexual orientation had greatly shaped not only the culture but how Christians had come to understand sexual ethics. This was most clearly seen in our response to homosexuality and same-sex desires in the ex-gay movement, where much of the focus became changing a person's orientation from homosexual to heterosexual.¹⁹ Though much has changed in recent years, many in the church still consider sexual orientation as a defining element of the human person and hold to a generalized hetero-eroticism as the ideal.

This brief historical sketch demonstrates the socially constructed nature of sexual orientation. Recognizing sexual orientation as a social construct will allow us to return to how the Bible defines human ontology—not as heterosexual or homosexual, but as male and female.

Recent Critiques of Sexual Orientation Ontology

Fortunately, good Christian work has emerged in the last 10 years that challenges the assumptions of SOO. I will look at the ways in which five authors have challenged SOO, primarily through their theological arguments.

¹⁹ Greg Johnson, *Still Time to Care: What We Can Learn from the Church's Failed Attempt to Cure Homosexuality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2021), 39-84.

A. Jenell Williams Paris

I will begin by looking at Jenell Williams Paris and her book *The End of Sexual Identity*. Her main theological critique that she offers is one that others will make as well: that desire (especially sexual desire) is a poor basis for identity. She argues that forming an identity based on desire “violates biblical themes.”²⁰ What biblical themes does it violate? The theme that “human desire is fickle, a mystery even to ourselves.”²¹ Recalling Jeremiah 17:9-10 that the heart is deceitful and wicked, she concludes, “We are known by God more truly than we will ever know ourselves. And even when living righteously, we, like Paul, find ourselves wanting things we don’t want to want...Desire is not a trustworthy indicator of human identity.”²²

In addition to this, she observes (and the science backs her up²³) that desires (and sometimes sexual desires) can fluctuate and change over time. If identity is tied to desire, then the corresponding identity fluctuates as much as one’s desires fluctuate. This is a recipe for a continual identity crisis and insecurity. This also does not allow us to scrutinize our desires in the way that Scripture calls us because when you are defined by your desires, then “to question desire is to question a person’s selfhood and worth.”²⁴

Instead, she proposes rooting our identity in being beloved by God and being a child of God.²⁵ This allows one’s identity to remain rooted in our transcendent relationship with God that

²⁰ Jenell Williams Paris, *The End of Sexual Identity: Why Sex is Too Important to Define Who We Are* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2011), 43.

²¹ Paris, *The End of Sexual Identity*, 43.

²² Paris, *The End of Sexual Identity*, 44.

²³ See, for example, Lisa M. Diamond, *Sexual Fluidity: Understanding Women’s Love and Desire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Brian Mustanski, Laura Kuper, and George J. Greene, “Development of Sexual Orientation and Identity” in *APA Handbook of Sexuality and Psychology, Vol. 1. Person-Based Approaches*, ed. D.L. Tolman and L.M. Diamond (Washington, DC, US: American Psychological Association, 2014),

²⁴ Paris, *The End of Sexual Identity*, 98.

²⁵ Paris, *The End of Sexual Identity*, 96-99.

we have through Jesus. Thus, even if our sexual desires change (or even if they stay the same), our identity remains stable and secure.

B. Christopher Yuan

Next, let's look at how Christopher Yuan addresses SOO in his book *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel*. Over the course of his book, he roots the concept of sexual orientation in a misunderstanding of theological anthropology—specifically the aspects of human identity and sin.

Yuan asserts that, biblically speaking, our fundamental identity is being created male and female in the image of God, and that “when we make anything else the core of our being—especially our sexuality—it’s not only a distortion of the *imago Dei* but also an affront to our Creator.”²⁶ Thus, we must embrace our given identity. Ultimately, because Jesus *is* the image of God, we are called to model ourselves after him—to be holy as he is holy.

This ties in with Yuan’s second critique that the sexual orientation framework doesn’t fully take original sin into account. Speaking of same-sex attractions, Yuan writes that both the ex-gay and celibate gay Christian identities and narratives utilize a “wrong framework” of sexual orientation. One side emphasizes that sexual orientation can be changed (even if only in degrees) from homosexual to heterosexual. The other side emphasizes sexual orientation as a given reality that cannot be changed, one that is morally neutral (or even good) and thus sanctifiable. Yuan proposes using the biblical framework of sin nature as a replacement to same-sex sexual orientation.²⁷ In particular, Yuan uses a Reformed understanding of original sin to label same-sex

²⁶ Christopher Yuan, *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel: Sex, Desire, and Relationships Shaped by God's Grand Story* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2018), 17.

²⁷ Yuan, *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel*, 39.

sexual desires not merely as a “natural consequence” of the Fall like blindness or disability, but as a “moral consequence” of the Fall.²⁸ He reasons that if sexual actions are not morally neutral, then neither can sexual desires be morally neutral. Since all desires have a teleology to them, if the end-goal of a desire is sinful, then such a desire is sinful as well.²⁹ This framework leads Yuan to reject sexual orientation as a category error, concluding, “The secular concept of sexual orientation does not fit into the biblical framework regarding sexual morality.”³⁰

The alternate framework Yuan proposes is *holy sexuality*, in which he emphasizes both vocation and ethics. Holy sexuality consists of two paths: “chastity in singleness and faithfulness in marriage.”³¹ The ethical imperative is holiness and to align all of one’s actions and desires with that calling.³² By evaluating each desire in terms of its end or *telos*, this frames the conversation around good vs. sinful desires rather than opposite-sex versus same-sex desires.³³ Sinful desires come from our flesh and we are ultimately called to crucify any sinful desire as we pursue holiness.

C. Rosaria Butterfield

Rosaria Butterfield takes a similar approach to Yuan and emphasizes many of the same ideas. One objection which Butterfield stresses is that “sexual orientation is a word that extends the definition of sexuality beyond its biblical confines.”³⁴ This is referring to the fact that the American Psychological Association’s (APA) definition of sexual orientation goes beyond mere

²⁸ Yuan, *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel*, 40.

²⁹ Yuan, *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel*, 61-62.

³⁰ Yuan, *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel*, 40.

³¹ Yuan, *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel*, 47.

³² Yuan, *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel*, 48.

³³ Yuan, *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel*, 69-70.

³⁴ Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, *Openness Unhindered: Further Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert on Sexual Identity and Union With Christ* (Pittsburg, PA: Crown & Covenant, 2015), 96.

sexual and romantic attraction to also include things like emotional attraction.³⁵ Butterfield observes, “Because the APA’s definition of sexual orientation includes nonsexual affection, this re-maps personhood in a way that God does not.”³⁶ By extending the reach of sexual orientation beyond the realm of the explicitly sexual, it comes to define a much greater swath of our identity such that it encompasses the entirety of the human person. Thus, things such as friendship or other non-erotic same-sex desires will be put under the umbrella of sexual orientation in a way that runs contrary to the way Scripture frames issues like friendship. By lumping all desires, fallen or not, natural or redeemed, into one category, we come to an understanding of the human person that is false, one that can even jeopardize a Christian’s sanctification by allowing both heterosexual and homosexual desires to be left unchallenged.

D. Daniel Mattson

Daniel Mattson, a Catholic, enters into the conversation over the “gay Christian” language debate and in response to other articles written on *First Things* by Joshua Gonnerman and Wesley Hill. While, for the purposes of this paper, I am trying to avoid weighing in on the language debate, I want to document Mattson’s observations about sexual orientation and human ontology, especially as it pertains to Catholic theology.

Mattson asks the question whether terms like gay or queer are “true ontological categories of the human person.”³⁷ Mattson, who is also attracted to members of the same sex,

³⁵ “Sexual orientation refers to an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, or both sexes. Sexual orientation also refers to a person’s sense of identity based on those attractions, related behaviors, and membership in a community of others who share those attractions.” The American Psychological Association, *Answers to Your Questions: For a Better Understanding of Sexual Orientation & Homosexuality* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2008), accessed March 12, 2022, <https://www.apa.org/topics/lgbtq/orientation.pdf>.

³⁶ Butterfield, *Openness Unhindered*, 96.

³⁷ Daniel Mattson, “Homosexual Orientation or Disorientation?” *First Things*, April 10, 2013, accessed March 20, 2022, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2013/04/homosexual-orientation-or-disorientation>.

says that he doesn't use such language because, "ontologically speaking, my core identity is as a man, made in the image and likeness of God" and that using such language "does injury to the dignity of what it means to be created 'male and female.'"³⁸ Mattson roots his logic in the natural law theory of the Catholic church. He reasons,

... we believe a falsehood about our nature when we embrace a gay identity, or when we believe that anyone has an "orientation" toward the same sex. I believe there is a natural law, and I believe in the truth proposed by the Catholic Church that my body reveals who (and what) I am. This truth about who I am, stitched into my very embodiedness as a man, supersedes any subjective experience I might have of "feeling (or being) gay," regardless of whether I view that experience as positive ... or negative.³⁹

For Mattson, it is natural law and the teaching of the Catholic Church on embodiment that takes precedent over one's personal experience or sexual desires. Our bodies have a sexual teleology built into them that we are called to obey regardless of the pattern our sexual desires. The only true ontology we should embrace as people is the one that God gave us at the beginning (Genesis 1:27) and which Jesus himself reaffirmed (Matthew 19:4): that of being male and female. Sexual orientation merely serves to obscure the purposes behind God's created identities of male and female, especially as they are revealed in our bodies.

E. Michael W. Hannon

Michael W. Hannon's essay in *First Things* is one of the most comprehensive assessments of SOO. Like Mattson's piece, it was written largely in response to the language debate that was happening in the early to mid-2010s surrounding "gay Christianity." However, in contrast to Mattson's piece, Hannon specifically calls out the misnomer of "heterosexuality" and

³⁸ Mattson, "Homosexual Orientation or Disorientation?"

³⁹ Mattson, "Homosexual Orientation or Disorientation?"

addresses a litany of its pitfalls. The pitfalls he points out tend to be of a historical, philosophical, and pastoral nature—all very much needed.

For the sake of this paper, though, I will point out the one explicit theological point he makes: that the categories of homosexual and heterosexual should be disposed of because it is “at odds with the freedom for which Christ set us free.”⁴⁰ Hannon recognizes homosexual and most heterosexual desires as temptations to sin. But in Christ, our sins and our sinful inclinations no longer define us. Hannon declares, “I am not my sin. I am not my temptation to sin. By the blood of Jesus Christ, I have been liberated from this bondage. I will have all sorts of identities, to be sure, especially in our crazily over-psychoanalytic age. But at the very least, none of these identities should be essentially defined by my attraction to that which separates me from God.”⁴¹ And yet, SOO seeks to do precisely that. According to Hannon, the language of homosexual and heterosexual, gay and straight, become the vehicles by which we adopt sinful inclinations as a part of our identity and ontology. This just helps “bind the sinner to his sinful inclinations ... laying on him a burden that is too great to bear.”⁴²

Applying Ryan Peterson’s Created and Constructed Identities to Sexual Orientation Ontology

In addition to the critiques outlined in the above section, theologian Ryan Peterson offers a helpful way that I wish to use to evaluate the theological validity of SOO: his framework of created identities and constructed identities.

⁴⁰ Michael W. Hannon, “Against Heterosexuality,” *First Things* 241, (March 2014): 29, accessed March 20, 2022, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2014/03/against-heterosexuality>.

⁴¹ Hannon, “Against Heterosexuality,” 31.

⁴² Hugh Barbour, “Do Homosexuals Exist? Or, Where Do We Go From Here?” *Chronicles Magazine*, (July 2013), accessed March 20, 2022, <https://www.chroniclesmagazine.org/do-homosexuals-exist-or-where-do-we-go-from-here-1/> quoted in Hannon, “Against Heterosexuality,” 29-30.

Peterson describes created identities as "those divinely determined realities that (1) make a creature the particular creature that it is, (2) fix that creature's purpose within creation, and (3) fix the creature's appropriate end."⁴³ Created identities are what you might call the objective and stable realities which pertain to every person's identity.

Constructed identities, on the other hand are "self-characterizing interpretations of (1) one's particular existence within creation as an individual human being, (2) one's connection to other particular human beings, and (3) the roles and responsibilities one has or ought to pursue."⁴⁴ Thus, constructed identities would be the subjective or variable realities that pertain to an individual's identity.

According to Peterson, humanity's fundamental created identity is the *imago Dei*.⁴⁵ In Genesis 1:26-27, humanity is said to be created in the image of God, which serves as a distinguishing marker for what makes humanity unique. Other aspects mentioned in the text like gender and the command to have dominion show how the image of God as human identity is "realized" in the world.⁴⁶ This is what Peterson calls our structural, relational, and vocational features.⁴⁷ Structural features would be things that pertain to the soul and body: our bodily sex, our rationality, our ability to use language, etc. Relational features refer to the major categories of human relationships: God-human, human-human, and human-world relations. And finally, vocational features are the ways in which humans are called to love in those relationships and the responsibilities that flow from that.

⁴³ Ryan Peterson, "Created and Constructed Identities in Theological Anthropology," in *The Christian Doctrine of Humanity: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics*, eds. Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 138.

⁴⁴ Peterson, "Created and Constructed Identities in Theological Anthropology" 140.

⁴⁵ Peterson, "Created and Constructed Identities in Theological Anthropology," 138.

⁴⁶ Ryan S. Peterson, *The Imago Dei as Human Identity: A Theological Interpretation* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016), 83.

⁴⁷ Peterson, "Created and Constructed Identities in Theological Anthropology," 138-140.

An important aspect of understanding Peterson's framework is comprehending the relationship between created identities, constructed identities, and their structural, relational, and vocational expressions. Peterson summarizes this relationship like this: "Human identity as the image of God *conditions* human nature, relations, and vocational responsibilities. Constructed identities are *conditioned by* human nature, relations and vocations"⁴⁸ (emphasis mine). In other words, our created identity exists prior to and determines the way we as humans interact with the world. Constructed identities come about as the result of trying to find our place in the world individually and communally and are formed "logically posterior to one's created identity."⁴⁹

So, where does sexuality fit into this picture? Using Peterson's framing, we can see that sexuality encompasses structural (bodily sex), relational (human-human relationships), and vocational (marriage and singleness) features of the human person. This also means that sexuality is both conditioned by our created identity as the image of God as well as a basis on which to form constructed identities. Based on these realities, it is understandable why something like sexual orientation would be tempting to adopt as an identity or ontological category. However, sexual orientation falls short upon further scrutiny.

Let's start by analyzing sexual orientation in light of our created identity as the image of God. Right after we are declared to be in God's image in Genesis 1, it is also declared that God creates us male and female. In one sense, being created male and female can be viewed as a secondary created identity that encompasses structural, relational, and vocational expressions. This identity of male and female leads to a particular expression seen in Genesis 2:23-24: The one image of God is created in two genders, and the two genders become one flesh through the bond of marriage and sexuality. This passage invokes structural features like gender difference

⁴⁸ Peterson, "Created and Constructed Identities in Theological Anthropology," 141.

⁴⁹ Peterson, "Created and Constructed Identities in Theological Anthropology," 140.

(man/wife, father/mother), relational features like exclusivity (two become one flesh), and vocational features like lifelong commitment (oneness and holding fast). These principles define the substantive and ethical shape of marriage and sexuality, which, in turn, shapes the substantive and ethical shape of sexual desire.

What then is the proper and biblical ordering of sexual desire? It is a sexual desire that is based on these same three principles of gender difference, exclusivity, and lifelong commitment. When this is applied to sexual orientation, it can be seen that any sexual orientation runs afoul of the biblical parameter of exclusivity. Why? Since sexual orientation is commonly conceived of as a generalized, indiscriminate eroticism for an entire gender, a subset of that gender, or some group of people—in other words, more than one person—then this would necessarily run into tension with the biblical principle of sexual exclusivity: the *two* becoming one flesh. When taken in conjunction with other Scripture like Matthew 5:28, we can see that the biblical standard for sexual desire is for it to be directed *only* towards one’s opposite-sex spouse. As authors Owen Strachan and Gavin Peacock conclude, “We may only rightly desire our spouse sexually; anyone else is off limits...”⁵⁰ and that “all sexual desire outside of the covenant of marriage calls for confession and repentance.”⁵¹ Admittedly, this might seem like a very strict standard, but this is where biblical principles seem to lead.⁵²

While sexual orientation does not seem to fit under a created identity, can sexual orientation meet the criteria of a constructed identity? At first glance, this would seem like a

⁵⁰ Owen Strachan and Gavin Peacock, *What Does the Bible Teach About Lust?* (Tain, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2020), 76.

⁵¹ Strachan and Peacock, *What Does the Bible Teach About Lust?*, 51.

⁵² As a side note, lest people become too discouraged, it’s important to remember what we are talking about here is sexual desire—a desire to have sex with someone. We are not referring to noticing a person’s beauty or what Strachan and Peacock call having a “complementary interest” or “complementary desire to marriage” for the opposite sex (Strachan and Peacock, *What Does the Bible Teach About Lust?*, 50-52). We are talking about a desire in which its *telos* is to have sex with someone that Scripture has put out of bounds.

more natural fit. Recall Peterson's definition of a self-characterizing interpretation of how one relates to other people with particular roles and responsibilities. Nothing in there sounds like it would exclude sexual orientation—until you consider that constructed identities must be submitted to our created identities and be conditioned by the gospel.⁵³ Peterson summarizes,

The pressing question related to human identity, then, is not whether there are personally and socially constructed identities, but whether these constructed identities can be judged on the basis of God's intention for the human creature and God's work in creation, judgment, redemption, and consummation. If they can be so judged, then there can be better or worse constructed identities insofar as they are in harmony or in conflict with God's creational/re-creational intent.⁵⁴

Since constructed identities can be influenced by one's sin or finite perspective, they must continually subject themselves to the created identities found in God's Word, the gospel, and God's character—where truth, objectivity, and stability can be found. Therefore, sexual orientation cannot be used as a constructed identity for the same reason that it cannot be a created identity: because it violates the principle of sexual exclusivity. It cannot be conditioned by the gospel or submitted to our created identities in such a way that it does not transgress God's created intent for sexuality.

Discussion

As I hope to have shown, sexual orientation as an ontological or essential category of human personhood is not compatible with a holistic biblical anthropology. The question then turns to how we as Christians move forward.

To start, we need to make sure that what is perceived as an ontological category (sexual orientation) is replaced with another ontological category. If we offer to replace what many

⁵³ Peterson, "Created and Constructed Identities in Theological Anthropology," 141-142.

⁵⁴ Peterson, "Created and Constructed Identities in Theological Anthropology," 143.

consider to be an essential part of their identity with something less powerful or less fundamental, then it will lack any persuasiveness or staying power. Sexual orientation, as it is commonly understood, reaches into the structural, relational, and vocational aspects of our lives.⁵⁵ Its replacement needs to reach into those same areas. That replacement should be our created identities as the *imago Dei* and being made male and female.

A. Structural (Body/Soul)

Let's look at how that plays out in the structural elements of our identity, that of soul and body.

Our fundamental problem as a human species is spiritual rebellion towards God—image bearers of God rising up against the God whose image we bear. We find ourselves with a spiritual ontology rooted in sin that can only be redeemed through the work of Jesus Christ. Through the cross, we receive a new spiritual ontology rooted in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17), who is the image of God (2 Corinthians 4:4). Our identity is that we are Christians; we are in Christ; we are God's children. Over the course of our lives, through the sanctification of the Holy Spirit, we image bearers are conformed to Christ's true and perfect image (Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18).

This is where many of the exhortations offered by Paris, Yuan, Butterfield, and Hannon regarding our new identity in Christ are most impactful. Our new spiritual identities rooted in Christ offer a true alternative to an identity rooted in sin. There is no hybrid identity where both

⁵⁵ Again, see the APA's definition of sexual orientation: "Sexual orientation refers to an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, or both sexes. Sexual orientation also refers to a person's sense of identity based on those attractions, related behaviors, and membership in a community of others who share those attractions."

sin and Christ coexist. Since sexual orientation is incompatible with a biblical anthropology, there can be no sexual orientation rooted in Christ—heterosexual, homosexual, or anything else.

However, I worry that many Christians only emphasize our spiritual identity when addressing sexual identity. Doing so leaves more to be desired.

For example, Paris's notion of rooting our identity in being beloved and in being a child of God offers the strength of speaking to our relational and emotional needs. However, while perhaps a good starting point, such an approach is incomplete. Although much of the battle of sexual orientation is waged at the level of emotion, one must also bring God's other created realities back into the conversation—our identities as male and female and a robust theology of the body.⁵⁶ Young people especially need something tangible to look at so they can get out of their own heads and see a reality beyond their own emotions. Our bodies have a design and purpose built into them. We must use that revelation to push back against the cultural tide that reduces sexuality and gender to mere matters of the mind. This is where I would like to see Protestants and Evangelicals rediscover the natural law tradition that our Catholic brothers and sisters more readily use. As Catholic author Christopher West entitled one of his books, *Our Bodies Tell God's Story*.⁵⁷ If we can tell that story, our sexual ethic will seem less arbitrary and be more convincing, more meaningful, and more sustainable.

⁵⁶ Although Paris occasionally touches on our identity as male and female, it doesn't seem to feature much in her solution to the question of what should replace sexual identity. This is perhaps because she spends portions of her book questioning the assumptions of what it means to be male and female as well as masculine and feminine stereotypes. Of course, such questions are worth asking, but in the process of deconstructing these categories and raising more questions than she answers, male and female comes out too weak or unclear a category to serve as the kind of strong ontological grounding that is needed to frame a passion like sexual desire. Sexual desire must be reconnected with our embodied existence.

⁵⁷ Christopher West, *Our Bodies Tell God's Story: Discovering the Divine Plan for Love, Sex, and Gender* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2020).

B. Relational

Next, I will move on to how replacing SOO with a male-female ontology affects the relational elements of our identity, specifically the human-human category of relationships.

Under a paradigm of sexual orientation, human-human relationships are defined by sexual desires and who one is sexually attracted to. If a relationship is defined by sexual desire, then sex becomes the *telos* of that relationship. People, then, become a means to an end for sexual fulfillment and pleasure. This, in turn, creates a framework where a person's value is based on their sexual desirability rather than their innate value as an image bearer of God.

Under the paradigm of a male-female ontology, a much richer tapestry of human-human relationships emerges. Gendered roles such as husband/wife, father/mother, son/daughter, and brother/sister become our identities and the modes in which we operate. Within the family, all these roles can be present, but many of these roles also exist spiritually within the Church (Matthew 12:46-50, Mark 10:29-30). There are spiritual fathers and mothers (1 Timothy 5:1-2; 1 Corinthians 4:15; 1 Thessalonians 2:11-12), spiritual sons and daughters (2 Corinthians 6:18, Ephesians 1:5, 1 Timothy 1:2), and spiritual brothers and sisters (Romans 8:29, 1 Timothy 5:2, James 2:15). This allows for much deeper relationships to form, not on the basis of sexual desire, but based on our created identity as male and female.

A male-female paradigm also allows for greater intimacy across a wider array of relationships. Under sexual orientation, not only are sexual and romantic attractions included but also emotional attractions. Intimacy becomes a spectrum, with sexual intimacy being the deepest kind of relationality and non-sexual relationality being the shallowest. Such a view muddies the waters of deep, intimate friendships and makes them seem to always be one step away from a sexual encounter. This leads to many (especially men) to being wary of deep, intimate

friendships. However, a male-female paradigm where sex is reserved for marriage allows for deep friendships to form along both same-sex and opposite-sex lines based on one's gender rather than one's sexual interest.

C. Vocational

Lastly, I will discuss the vocational implications of replacing SOO with a male-female ontology.

Under SOO, vocation is determined by sexual desire and fulfillment. As was just discussed, sex becomes the *telos* of relationships, and one's purpose comes to be defined by the pursuit of sex. Sexual fulfillment then becomes the only way one can achieve true meaning and purpose. Within the Christian framework, this leaves only the married as those who can be truly happy and fulfilled. Such a view distorts God's picture of both marriage and singleness. With sex as the *telos*, marriage (and one's spouse) becomes the means to sexual fulfillment rather than sex being a means to achieve unity with one's spouse.

On the other side, singleness, without sexual fulfillment, becomes a "lesser-than" vocation. Those who are single are left to be continually frustrated by God's sexual ethics with no recourse other than marriage. Christopher Yuan's paradigm of *holy sexuality* offers a great alternative for sexual vocations. Under this paradigm, sex is no longer what you strive towards but holiness. This allows singleness to be valued as a legitimate vocation, oriented towards serving God and his church (1 Corinthians 7:25-40). Likewise, within marriage, this allows sex to serve its appropriate end of oneness and fruitfulness rather than personal satisfaction and fulfillment.

Adopting an ontology of male and female also enriches the vocations of singleness and marriage. If you are single, you can have deep and meaningful relationships as brothers or sisters in Christ and as friends. My maleness allows me to minister to other men and women, each in unique ways. Similarly, a woman's femaleness allows her to minister to other men and women, each in unique ways. In marriage, one's maleness defines the vocations of husband and father, and one's femaleness defines the vocations of wife and mother.

Conclusion

Sexual orientation is a social construct that has infected our culture and the church. Regardless of whether we think of ourselves as straight, gay, queer, or anything else, it has caused us to develop a distorted image of the human person, defining ourselves in terms of our sexual desires rather than our created identities of the image of God and being made male and female. When sexual desire becomes a fundamental part of who we are, then sexual fulfillment becomes the *telos* of our relationships, and our vocations become geared towards the fulfillment of that end.

Even though I have addressed this from a more theological perspective, I hope some of the pastoral and ethical implications have been made apparent. Sexuality touches many areas of our lives and virtually every part of our being. Whether a Christian is male or female, married or single, has opposite-sex or same-sex sexual desires, everyone has a stake in recovering a biblical anthropology and sexuality, one that is rooted in our true created identity as the image of God and being made male and female rather than being rooted in sexual orientation.

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