



*"And such were some of you..."*

## **Role of Christian Counseling for Persons with Unwanted Same-Sex Attractions**

### INTRODUCTION

Restored Hope Network (RHN) believes that skilled helpers from a variety of disciplines contribute to the transformational work of Jesus Christ in the lives of persons with unwanted same-sex attraction. Chief among these disciplines is biblical theology, which also helps us to value the licensed clinical and pastoral caregivers that practice psychological methodologies. RHN rests on the foundation of a distinctly Christian worldview: we acknowledge one God who is, who made us, and who seeks to redeem those whom He has made. Thus, biblical theology is our guide for discerning which expressions of the comparatively new field of psychology are best suited for persons with same-sex attraction seeking transformation.

In short, biblical theology guides our use of psychology. Most helpful here is how Scripture defines the human person (theological anthropology); RHN understands God's call upon humanity as having special significance to who we are as male and female. We believe that He made us to manifest Himself in our gendered, biologically differentiated selves (Gen. 1: 26, 27) and in how we relate interdependently with our gender counterparts (1Cor 11:11, 12). St. John Paul II and Reformed theologian Karl Barth describe bearing God's image in our humanity as "a call to exist for the other, to be a gift" (1); "this radical sexual duality is the root of all other fellowship" (2). RHN holds that God created all persons to thrive in that duality and to experience it in a variety of relationships: with family members, friends, co-workers and ministers. Bearing God's image is what it means to be human in community, whether one is single or married.

### GENDER (DIS)INTEGRATION

The catastrophic impact of sin upon our gendered selves also influences our understanding and use of psychology. Scripture describes the spiritual darkness that results in worshipping mere creatures, including homosexual practice (Rom. 1:16-32), and the frustration of the entire creation due to sin's impact (Rom. 8: 18-25). Framed by a biblical understanding, we can derive from the psychological sciences keys as to how we become whole men and women, what frustrates our development as persons, and how we might resume the journey toward "submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ (Eph. 5:21)" (3).

Especially helpful to RHN are the findings of developmental psychology as applied to gender integration. RHN distinguishes between biological gender and the formation of gender identity upon the base of one's biological gender (4). As no evidence yet exists to support an inborn predetermination to homosexuality (5), RHN takes seriously the variables that can complicate progression to adult sexual wholeness and attributes this knowledge to social scientists who have researched gender identity development and treatment of persons with unwanted same-sex attraction for nearly a century (6).

RHN acknowledges what we do not know; in the words of Paul R. McHugh and Lawrence S. Mayer, “Explaining the exact biological and psychological origins of sexual desires and behaviors is one that has not yet been and may never be satisfactorily completed” (7). However, RHN takes seriously many factors that contribute to a person’s development of same-sex attraction, including biological factors that may create a temperamental predisposition to same-sex attraction (8), how we in our unique personalities interact with families-of-origin and relationships outside our families, and the moral decisions we make in light of cultural values (9).

#### VULNERABILITIES OF THE SAME-SEX ATTRACTED

Influential for many strugglers are the core attachments one secures (or fails to secure) in the first four years of life with one or both parents. Attachment theorists focus on the complex, potentially frustrated dance between young children and caregivers and how these early impasses may contribute to malformed gender identification and sexual disorder later on in life (10).

Compounding frustration in early attachment are unusually high rates of childhood sexual abuse and other mental health issues that intensify the problem one faces in resolving same-sex attraction (11). Collective evidence cites persons who experience same-sex attraction as 2-3X more likely than heterosexual counterparts to have experienced childhood sexual abuse (12). Persons with same-sex attraction also experience a disproportionately high rate of mental health problems, including double the numbers of substance abuse, anxiety disorders, depression, and suicide risk than found in the general population (13).

Adding to these vulnerabilities is new evidence that sexual orientation and identification may be unstable. Dr. Ritch Savin-Williams of Cornell University rejects the notion of a fixed sexual orientation, noting after an extensive review of the pertinent studies that “all attraction categories other than opposite–sex had lower stability over time” (14). Dr. Lisa Diamond of the University of Utah, who studied with Savin-Williams, has focused much of her work on the sexual fluidity of women and their high rates of evolving sexual desires and identifications (15). Her most recent research also found a higher incidence of fluidity in males, especially young males, than she had anticipated (16). And her work was matched by a long-term study of men who forsook teen “gay” identification once they entered adulthood (17).

RHN realizes that persons with same-sex attraction are a vulnerable population. Skilled Christian helpers who share our anthropology are invaluable in advocating for persons who face a host of issues in navigating unwanted same-sex attraction.

#### TRUST AND THE HEALING BOND

The helper’s skill at forming a healing bond with the client is the key to effective counseling. As healthy parents help their children internalize well-being through supportive, empathic relating (18), so does a counselor with client. Most caregivers agree that in spite of different counseling modalities, “the therapeutic/bond rapport is the backbone of effective counseling,” (19) which provides “a corrective emotional experience in which the client grows up by working through obstacles and blocks to maturity” (20).

Especially important is the skill required to identify early relational wounds and to impart love there. “The goal for the client is to no longer act out his past hurts in the present but to experience authentic feelings about his past in the present. Given therapeutic encouragement, the client’s identified conflict is redefined, transformed, and imbued with coherent meaning” (21). Love liberates the possibility for persons to see reality differently and to make choices for love that help to restore broken histories and lead to a more whole future.

Skilled therapists excel at building trust over the long haul with clients. On the basis of consistent, well-boundaried care, a variety of topics related to overcoming same-sex attraction can be addressed. These include overcoming relational addictions, and the healing of abusive sexual experiences that often result in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a condition twice as likely in persons with same-sex attraction (22). In the light of a safe advocate, one’s fear and shame begins to be absorbed by consistent care. “Here the client can discover forgiveness where she most needs to receive and give it and the chance to restore moral boundaries of truth and justice. As the counselor values and affirms the client in this process, his or her restoration as a sexual being gains momentum” (23).

Such restoration usually requires a lot of time. Extensive relational damage requires extensive relational healing, and there are no shortcuts for building trust. But on the basis of such trust, the therapist/client relationship can guide one into discovering a way through old wounds and new moral challenges. One can begin to view a new horizon opening for his or her gender destiny. “It is amazing how we can help fill in the gaps for clients who crave a greater vision for themselves as male or female but who receive little such input elsewhere” (24).

In order for therapy to be effective for persons seeking transformation, a few considerations may prove helpful:

#### MULTI-FACETED APPROACH

However important the therapeutic relationship may be, it has significant time limits, at most one or two 50-minute sessions a week. RHN recognizes that significant transformation in one’s identity and relationships requires more than what counseling alone can offer, namely a greater commitment to a community of faith and recovery groups which support one’s goals (25).

#### DISCLOSING VALUES

It is important that the client discover the counselor’s values concerning biblical anthropology and therapy itself. Does (s)he believe change is possible? How does (s)he understand change and the process of change?

A skilled helper will express with integrity his or her perspective on the goals and process of counseling. The counselor should provide ample space for sorting out the client’s difficulties when value differences arise between them. “There is an art and a science to giving clients the space to exercise their own choices and autonomy while also providing an honest expression of truth in regards to gender and sexuality. I find it helpful at the early stages of the therapeutic relationship

to disclose my personal beliefs and biases regarding how I understand the human person. I give my clients a picture of how my Christian ethics may impact therapy and grant them freedom to determine whether this relationship will be helpful for them” (26).

### ASSESSING CLIENT MOTIVATION

A wise counselor will also work with the client on determining the solidity of his or her motivation; the effectiveness of the therapeutic process hinges more on the determination of the client than on the therapist. So the motivation and clarity of the one seeking help matters, and it can take time to get at what is actually driving the desire for change.

### PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES

One should ensure that any professional counselor has professional boundaries. These include expressed confidentiality policies, terms for communication outside of sessions, length of sessions, and clear expectations of how much the helper will disclose about his/her personal life. A skilled helper recognizes that his/her ongoing work of personal integration is crucial for clear and objective dealings with the client. Any hint of the counselor blurring boundaries with the client by introducing emotional or sexual partiality is unethical (27).

### CAUTIONS

Furthermore, RHN decries any therapeutic intervention like so-called “holding” therapy or any tactile effort to approximate early parental attachment. The same applies to any use of visual sexual stimulus or nudity. RHN also rejects any behavior modification techniques designed to create an aversion to same-sex attraction on the basis that these are shaming, ineffective, and dehumanizing (28).

One should beware of any enthusiastic Christian helper who promises radical change through a new intervention. Change takes time. There are no shortcuts, and it is unrealistic to assume that therapy is going to completely eradicate same-sex attraction. A wise therapist will help a client to sort out and resolve different components of the problem (arousal/ attraction/ identity/ behavior) with varying outcomes. Therapy is not magic. Wholeness requires hard work, and is a lifetime aspiration made possible through God’s grace at work in personal effort and interpersonal help.

### CONCLUSION

RHN holds that transformation involves the freedom to become a whole-enough gender gift (29), which involves loving persons of one’s own gender without sexual intention and growing in rightful reliance on the gift of the opposite gender. Such freedom is the domain of both singles and marrieds, and is based on a biblical anthropology. The latter guides RHN in discerning skilled psychological help for persons with unwanted same-sex attraction.

1. St. John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created them: A Theology of the Body* (Boston: Pauline Books, 2006), 87:5.

2. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III: The Doctrine of Creation* (New York: T and T Clark, 2010), 187.
3. Timothy G. Lock, *Living the Truth in Love*, Janet Smith and Paul Check eds., (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015), 254-262.
4. Pope Francis, *Joy of Love* (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on Love in the Family), 286.
5. Timothy G. Lock... 247-249; 'Sexual Orientation, Controversy, and Science': *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* (Vol. 17, Number 2, 2016), J. Michael Bailey, Paul L. Vasey, Lisa M. Diamond, S. Marc Breedlove, Eric Vilain, and Marc Epprecht, p. 76; 'Sexuality and Gender: Findings from the Biological, Psychological, and Social Sciences': *The New Atlantis*, Volume 50, 2016, Lawrence S. Mayer, Paul R. McHugh, pp. 29-33.
6. Janelle Hallman, *The Heart of Same-Sex Attraction* (Downer's Grove: IVP, 2008); Julie Hamilton, Homosexuality 101.com; Elizabeth Moberly, *Homosexuality: A New Christian Ethic* (Cambridge: John Clarke, 1983); Joseph Nicolosi, *Shame and Attachment Loss* (Downer's Grove: IVP, 2005); Christopher Rosik, 'Change in Homoerotic Behavior and Feelings is Possible': *Theology Matters* (Journal), Nov.2008; G. van den Aardweg, *The Battle for Normality* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997)
7. 'Sexuality and Gender...' p. 60.
8. Janelle Hallman, *Living the Truth in Love*...239.
9. Joseph Nicolosi, *Shame and Attachment Loss* (Downer's Grove: IVP, 2005), 58.
10. Elizabeth Moberly, *Psychogenesis* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983)
11. Timothy G. Lock, *Living the Truth in Love*...251, 267-270.
12. 'Sexuality and Gender...' pp. 43-49; 'Sexual Orientation, Controversy...' Boys who later identify as 'gay' are seven times more likely than heterosexual counterparts to have had early sexual experiences with males at least five years or older than them, p. 81.
13. 'Sexuality and Gender...' pp. 7, 8.
14. Ibid. p. 58.
15. Lisa Diamond, *Sexual Fluidity: Understanding Women's Love and Desire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).
16. "Lisa Diamond on sexual fluidity of men and women," [www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=m2rTHDOuUBw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=m2rTHDOuUBw).
17. 'Sexuality and Gender...' p. 51
18. Janelle Hallman...227.
19. Interview with Abbey Foard, MA, NCC, LPC: April 2016.
20. Interview with Melissa Ingraham, MA, NCC, LMHC: April 2016.
21. Joseph Nicolosi...51.
22. 'Sexuality and Gender...' p. 46.
23. Interview with Abbey Foard...
24. Ibid.
25. RHN Position Paper on 'Transformation of Persons with Same-Sex Attraction', 2014.
26. Interview with Abbey Foard...
27. Interview with Melissa Ingraham...
28. Ibid.
29. The concept of relational gift-giving is derived from Saint John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* and is based upon one's reconciliation with his or her value as either male or female.