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THE WAY FORWARD: Holy Love and Holy Intentionality with Sexual and Gender Minorities

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EIGHT YEARS.

Eight years ago, in *Obergefell v Hodges*, the U.S. Supreme Court granted marriage rights to same-sex couples. My older son was attending college in Rowan County, Kentucky, where the county clerk refused to give marriage licenses to these couples despite the ruling. While perhaps not appropriate for a civil employee in a country that values the separation between Church and state, the clerk's sentiment represented millions of people, including many Christians, who saw same-sex marriage as a violation of God's boundaries for marriage and sexuality. That once-pervasive opposition has diminished to a barely audible background mumble.

We have seen a striking cultural shift over the past twenty years in both the acceptance and prevalence of sexual

radical reversal in the degree of societal acceptance.

And the Church? In 2020, only 34 percent of white evangelicals in their fifties or older supported same-sex marriage², while 51 percent of younger evangelical adults aged 18–49 supported same-sex marriage. But we really cannot fully see how quickly things are shifting if we group younger adults with older ones. The youngest evangelical adults, i.e., those in their twenties, are probably even more supportive; we know that across all adults under thirty-four, 84 percent supported these marriages.³

This about-face of public opinion explains why debates about sexuality only seem to occur within faith communities these days. Most non-believers have worked through any reservations, and even many Christians have found some way to justify their changing beliefs, particularly if they have a loved one who has come out as gay. These justifications depend on several arguments:

1. Scripture was not referring to married same-sex relationships.⁴
2. God is love; thus every expression of love is good.⁵

A growing number of Christians are adapting their understanding of Scripture to accommodate their presuppositions about sexuality rather than submitting their ideas about sexuality to conform with Scripture.

diversity. Just consider how the approval of same-sex marriage has changed. In 1996, 73 percent of U.S. adults opposed same-sex marriage; by 2021, 70 percent supported it¹—a

1 Justin McCarthy, "Gallup Poll Social Series: Values and Beliefs." *Gallup* (June 2, 2022).

2 Public Religion Research Institute, "Broad Support for LGBT Rights Across all 50 States: Findings from the 2019 American Values Atlas," *Public Religion Research Institute* (2020).

3 McCarthy, "Gallup Poll."

4 Karen R. Keen, *Scripture, Ethics, and the Possibility of Same-sex Relationships* (Eerdmans, 2018); Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-sex Relationships* (Convergent Books, 2014).

5 Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*

3. Everyone has the right to be in a life-giving, committed, intimate relationship.⁶
4. Sexual attraction is innate and immutable and therefore consecrated.⁷
5. Scripture is limited in understanding contemporary issues so new revelation is necessary.⁸
6. The historical Church doctrines were also mistaken about slavery and the subjugation of women.⁹
7. The Church has relaxed its stance on other sexual taboos.
8. We will lose our loved ones by not fully affirming them.
9. We will cause mental health problems.¹⁰

While a rebuttal can be made to each point, the more important insight is this: A growing number of Christians are adapting their understanding of Scripture to accommodate their presuppositions about sexuality rather than submitting their ideas about sexuality to conform with Scripture.

This reversal in opinion is about more than just sexual behavior; it is a seismic existential shift in the way we understand identity.¹¹ Few people over the age of forty grew up knowing anyone who understood themselves to be defined by a sexuality or a gender incongruent with their biological sex. A February 2022 Gallup Poll bore this out, finding only 3.5 percent of adults aged 42–76 identify as a sexual/gender minority. In contrast, nearly everyone younger than thirty knows of someone

who identifies by a non-heterosexual sexuality or as a non-cisgender (“queer”), as that group now comprises 21 percent of those aged 18–26.¹² And for those under eighteen? A study released in April 2023 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found one out of every four high school students now identifies as a sexual or gender minority.¹³ Just eight years ago, it was one out of ten. Among the increase, teen girls showed the sharpest increase in rates of gender incongruence, increasing 4,400 percent between 2007 and 2017.¹⁴

What’s Happening?

An intriguing 2018 study by researcher Lisa Littman explored this very question. Despite some methodological issues, insight can be gained from her interviews of 256 parents whose biological daughters began to experience gender dysphoria around puberty.¹⁵ Almost 90 percent of these parents reported that, along with the sudden or rapid onset of gender dysphoria, their child either had an increase in their social media/internet use, belonged to a friend group in which one or multiple friends became transgender-identified during a similar timeframe, or both. Post-onset, these parents also reported their children showed a decline in mental health (47%), deteriorating parent-child relationships (57%), and/or distrust of non-LGBTQ sources (47%).

This study largely attributes the increasing prevalence of sexual and

(HarperOne, 2012).

- 6 Julie Rodgers, “How I Was Moved to Support Same-sex Marriage in the Church,” 2016, <https://www.julierodgers.com/how-i-was-moved-to-support-same-sex-marriage-in-the-church>.
- 7 David G. Myers and Letha Dawson Scanzoni, *What God Has Joined Together: The Christian Case for Gay Marriage* (HarperOne, 2006).
- 8 Mel White, “What the Bible Does and Doesn’t Say about Homosexuality,” Soulforce Inc., 2022, <https://melwhite.org/bible-says-homosexuality>.
- 9 Fred Nielsen, “Slavery, Gay Rights, and the Bible,” *Origins: Current Events in Historical Perspective*, May 2012, https://origins.osu.edu/history-news/slavery-gay-rights-and-bible?language_content_entity=en.
- 10 White, “What the Bible Does and Doesn’t Say.”
- 11 Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Crossway, 2020): 20.
- 12 Jeffrey M. Jones, “LGBT Identification in U.S. Ticks Up to 1.7%,” *Gallup* (February 17, 2022).
- 13 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Youth Risk Behavior Survey: 2021 Results,” *U.S. Department of Health & Human Services* (April 2023).
- 14 Lisa Littman, “Parent Reports of Adolescents and Young Adults Perceived to Show Signs of a Rapid Onset of Gender Dysphoria,” *PLoS ONE* 13, no. 8 (2021): e0202330.
- 15 Littman, “Parent Reports,” e0202330.

gender minorities¹⁶ to a social contagion effect, suggesting that young people are likely to imitate what they see modeled in social media and among their friends. Others have argued that any apparent increase in the number of sexual and gender minorities is illusory; rather, it is merely a result of young people feeling more freedom to be honest about who they are.¹⁷ Similarly, others claim that sexual diversity and gender incongruence have permeated human history and human cultures, even in Scripture;¹⁸ thus, this is not a new phenomenon. A more gnostic approach claims that our real identity is found through introspection and inner-felt experience; in fact, this psychological self, compared to one's physical body, is the truer indicator of our identity, and even children are believed to be able to access this self-awareness.¹⁹

Perhaps, though, the most insightful analysis comes from my research collaborator, Mark Yarhouse, who applies the looping effect originally posed by Ian Hacking.²⁰ As novel experiences and identities are labeled

and classified by professionals, individuals navigating sexual and gender identity are also responding to being classified—often by altering their behaviors and/or their self-perceptions. When newer theories emerge to explore and

potentially validate the latest ways people are experiencing themselves, this resulting language works its way into the common vernacular and reshapes popular culture. Many of the researchers' conclusions are taught and reiterated until they become taken-for-granted axioms. Experts then assimilate these new "facts" and adapt their classification systems accordingly, thus causing these individuals to react again, perpetually generating even more expressions and experiences of sexual and gender identity.

None of these models fully account for the diversity we now see in sexual and gender identity. According to the American Psychological Association, "There is no consensus among scientists about the exact reasons that an individual develops a heterosexual, bisexual, gay, or lesbian orientation. Many think that nature and nurture both play complex roles; most people experience little or no sense of choice about their sexual orientation."²¹ At this point, the same may also be said of gender incongruence.

Misconstrued Identities²²

Self-concept is becoming centered in our attractions and our felt sense of gender, not the fullness of the *Imago Dei* within us.²³ While God did create us in his image as male and female, biological sex and sexual attraction serve to move humans toward intimacy so they could fulfill the divine directive to be fruitful

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16 "Sexual and gender minorities" are those individuals who hold a sexual identity other than heterosexual and/or a gender identity other than cisgender (i.e., biological sex and experienced gender are congruent). This term is used instead of the more typical "LGBTQ individuals" to acknowledge that some people may experience nonheterosexual attractions or non-cisgender gender but they have not claimed the related sexual and gender identity labels used by the LGBTQ community.

17 Brooke Kato, "Fewer Teens than Ever Identify as Heterosexual: CDC Report," *New York Post* (April 27, 2023).

18 Keith Sharpe, *The Gay Gospels: Good News for LGBT People* (O-Books, John Hunt Publishing, 2011).

19 Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*.

20 Mark Yarhouse and Julia Sadusky, *Emerging Gender Identities: Understanding the Diverse Experiences of Today's Youth* (Brazos Press, 2020); Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Harvard University Press, 1999); Ian Hacking, "Making Up People," *London Review of Books* 28, no. 16 (2006): 23–26.

21 American Psychological Association, "Understanding Sexual Orientation and Homosexuality" (October 29, 2008).

22 Adapted from Janet B. Dean, "Reflecting His Image," *Holiness Today* 21, no. 6 (Nov/Dec 2019): 8–13.

23 Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*.

and multiply.²⁴ Old Testament scholar Carmen Imes emphasizes this distinction by saying, “Our identity as God’s image implies a representational role—the Creator God appointed humans to exercise his rule over creation on his behalf.”²⁵ Even so, she adds, “God’s image is not something we bear; it’s something we are . . .”²⁶ and it is evidenced in work as well as relationships with God, others, and the world.²⁷

Sexual intimacy is also an expression of our internal operating system, typically conceptualized as a biopsychosocial model.²⁸ We are a dynamic system of three components: our biology, our psychology, and our relationality. Each has its function but always affects the others as they also seem to work together as one. This whole system operates within a larger spiritual relationship with God himself.

Our internal structure is trinitarian, seemingly reflecting the nature of our triune God,²⁹ and perhaps one of its clearest expressions is found in our sexuality and gender. Consider the mystery of sexual intercourse in holy marriage—a physical act that creates feelings of love and care between two human beings, a man and a woman, through a neurochemical process that bonds them together as one in a lifelong covenantal relationship before God and has the potential to create new life. As such, sexuality and gender within marriage seem to be a significant sign that points us to our relationship with God and the eschatological union between Christ and his church.³⁰

However, we tend to forget sin causes significant distortion of sexuality and gender. Sin makes it impossible for us to see clearly. As explained by Martin Luther,

sin “bends the best gifts of God towards” the self (*incurvatus in se*);³¹ thus, instead of our sexuality and gender pointing us to God, they become idols for their own sake, and, in today’s world, they become the very basis for how many people understand their own identity. Even so, it’s important to remember that all of us have, to some degree, struggled with sexual proclivities and identity issues that, without divine boundaries, would destroy us as we attempt to find fulfillment and make sense of who we are.

New Testament scholar Robert Mulholland proclaims that “the greatest thirst of our being is [actually] for fulfillment in Christ’s image,”³² yet sin corrupts this desire, causing us to “try to fill [it] with all sorts of inadequate substitutes.”³³ Sin causes us to justify self-understanding, identity, and sexuality that are at odds with God’s perfect design. Sin leads us to trust in our personal feelings, thoughts, and experiences over any authority whatsoever, including our biological realities and even the authoritative Word of God.³⁴ Sin limits our understanding of God, his holiness, and his hatred of sin. It leads us to lift our imperfect understandings of gender and sexuality as idols, and sin deceives us into believing that the Lord approves of it all.

None of us can separate ourselves from sin, but Jesus Christ came into the world and sacrificed his sinless life for our reconciliation with the Father, thereby making it possible, through the work of the Holy Spirit, for us to be brought into union with Christ and to find freedom from volitional sin. Here we are made new, we become holy, and we find our identity

24 Genesis 1:26–27.

25 Carmen Joy Imes, *Being God’s Image* (IVP Academic, 2023), Kindle Location 142.

26 Imes, *Being God’s Image*, 139.

27 Imes, *Being God’s Image*, 853.

28 G. L. Engel, “The Need for a New Medical Model: A Challenge for Biomedicine,” *Science* 196 (1977): 129–136.

29 I am not making a theological argument at the biopsychosocial nature of humans is an exact replica of three divine beings but rather a reflection.

30 Matt O’Reilly, “What Makes Sex Beautiful? Marriage, Aesthetics, and the Image of God in Genesis 1–2 and Revelation 21–22,” In Gerald Hiestand and Todd Wilson’s (eds.), *Beauty, Order, and Mystery: A Christian Vision of Human Sexuality* (IVP Academic, 2017), 197–212.

31 Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, L515–516.

32 M. Robert Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey (Transforming Resources)* (InterVarsity Press, 2016), 42.

33 Mulholland, *Invitation*, 42.

34 See also Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 36.

in Christ, even as the incarnate Son is in the Father.³⁵

What does it mean to have our identity in Christ? It means surrendering everything—our desires, our needs, our hopes, our presuppositions, our sense of self—in full submission to him. It means remaining in him and he in us (Jn 15:1–4). It means loving and obeying him (Jn 15:9–17, 1 Jn 5:2–4, Rom 1:5, Rev 14:12). It means solely looking to our relationship with Christ to define ourselves.³⁶ “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:3).

Challenges for the Church

While we have this hope in Christ, the Church seems unprepared for the rapidly changing terrain of sexual and gender identity. We are still struggling with

sexual difficulties ourselves, fearing that sexual sin is inevitable because we have seen too many Christian leaders fail. In fact,

57 percent of pastors and 64 percent of youth pastors admit some struggle with porn,³⁷ and up to 38 percent of pastors have engaged in some kind of sexual misconduct.³⁸ We attempt to address

these issues by setting “rigid” boundaries between men and women, as we Christians are much more likely to perceive ambiguous behaviors, like hugging or talking on the phone, as being signs of infidelity, not friendship.³⁹ Through our fear of falling into sexual sin, we are, intentionally or unintentionally, telling our people that sexuality is bad.

Perhaps it is this overly negative perception of sexuality that leads too many of us to respond to sexual and gender diversity with fear and disgust, quickly becoming angry and judgmental. Those in the Church who want to avoid such an ugly response find themselves with only two choices—shutting down in passivity and neglect or grasping a cheapened form of love that embraces not only everyone but everything.⁴⁰

As sexual and gender minorities became more prominent in our culture, the Church has found itself needing to shift, and perhaps even needing to correct some errors, if we want to remain relevant. How do we counter the narrative that we are “non-affirming” and thus unloving? How do we offer a positive, attractive, and holy view of human sexuality?⁴¹ How do we help people discern vocational singleness?⁴² How do we engage celibate, faithful gay Christians in our church communities? How do we help people meet intimacy needs appropriately outside of marriage?⁴³

It means surrendering everything—our desires, our needs, our hopes, our presuppositions, our sense of self—in full submission to him.

35 2 Corinthians 5:17; Bounds, Christopher. Personal communications, September 2019.

36 Galatians 3:26–27.

37 Barna, “The Porn Phenomenon: The Impact of Pornography in the Digital Age,” 2016, <https://www.barna.com/the-porn-phenomenon/#.Vp5-fzb6fNU>.

38 J. Thoburn and D. M. Whitman, “Clergy Affairs: Emotional Investment, Longevity of Relationship and Affair Partners,” *Pastoral Psychology* 52(6): 491–506.

39 B. A. Mattingly, K. Wilson, E. M. Clark, A. W. Bequette, and D. J. Weidler, D. J., “Foggy Faithfulness: Relationship Quality, Religiosity, and the Perceptions of Dating Infidelity Scale in an Adult Sample,” *Journal of Family Issues* 31(11) (2010): 1465–1480, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X10362348>; A. E. Thompson and L. F. O’Sullivan, L. F., “I Can But You Can’t: Inconsistencies in Judgments of and Experiences with Infidelity,” *Journal of Relationships Research* 7(3) (2016): 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.1017/jrr.2016.1>.

40 Janet B. Dean and Kevin Compton, “Holy Love: The Truly Loving Nazarene Response to Sexual and Gender Minorities,” *Biblical Sexuality: Why the Church of the Nazarene Is Right on Human Sexuality*, M. Friedeman and E. Friedeman, eds. (Friedeman, 2023); see also Mark Wingfield, *Why Churches Need to Talk about Sexuality: Lessons Learned from Hard Conversations about Sex, Gender, Identity, and the Bible* (Fortress Press, 2019).

41 Useful resources for this include: Christopher Yuan, *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel: Sex, Desire, and Relationships Shaped by God’s Grand Story* (Multnomah, 2018); Beth Felker Jones, *Faithful: A Theology of Sex* (Zondervan, 2015); Gerald Hiestand and Todd Wilson, eds., *Beauty, Order, and Mystery: A Christian Vision of Human Sexuality* (IVP Academic, 2017).

42 Pieter Valk of the ministry, Equip Your Community, is doing great work with vocational singleness. See <https://equipyourcommunity.org>.

43 Wesley Hill, *Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian* (Brazos

Just as we are beginning to find some hope that we can find answers to these questions, increasing gender diversity shines an incredibly revealing light on our deficits and, perhaps, our failed attempts to make sense of diverse sexual identities. Consider these observed dilemmas.

First, with sexual identity, the Church attempted to separate people's attractions and identity from their behavior so Christians could show respect for persons while not condoning same-sex sexual behavior. The weakness in this approach⁴⁴ is emphasized by gender diversity, for gender identity and expression are most often inextricably integrated. Second, with sexual identity, because Christians could forbid the behavior, they did not have to directly deal with the challenges this presented to housing, bathrooms, education, athletics, language use, categorization of students, and such, whereas, increasing gender diversity demands even more accommodations from our church communities. Third, the Church tends to be rigid about proper gender expression and appropriate interactions between men and women, with little ability to create space for those who do not fit into our narrowly defined boxes.⁴⁵ Gender also requires a more nuanced theological understanding than sexuality requires; we have not yet done enough theological and biblical work to face this challenge.

Further, the LGBTQ+ community and its reactions to the Church seem to have elucidated our "lived" priorities, which too often fail to align with the actual priorities of our faith. For example, the

Church has emphasized purity over hospitality, wherein we tend to want to keep sinners at a distance so they cannot affect us.⁴⁶ We also tend to wear "holy masks" rather than be authentic and open about our struggles.⁴⁷ We tend to practice "spiritual bypassing" by saying things like, "Just trust God," "Pray more," "All things work together for good to them that love God," instead of stepping into the pain and anguish of mental health issues.⁴⁸ We have focused more on behavior management through legalism⁴⁹ and the transmission of knowledge through Christian education rather than the transformation of souls through true discipleship.⁵⁰

How then are we now surprised that people perceive us as hateful and unloving? How then are we now surprised that our people are unsure about how to enter this conversation? Woe to us. Even so, we can take hope, for these weaknesses represent growth areas, places wherein the Holy Spirit can shape and form the Church as she is prepared for her wedding day with the Lamb.

The Way of Holy Love

We also can take hope, for there is a way forward that may be able to speak to people's deepest needs. People will not find identity transformation in the context of only legal and moral codes; fortunately, we have something far greater to offer them. The call to holiness cannot be separated from the profound love and grace of God.⁵¹ God is holy love⁵² and calls us, his children, to the same. Thus, as much as

Press, 2015).

44 Mark R. Hoffart and Gordon Hodson, "Is Subjective Ambivalence Toward Gays a Modern Form of Bias?," *Personality and Individual Differences* 69 (2014): 75–80.

45 Alice Matthews, *Gender Roles and the People Of God: Rethinking What We Were Taught about Men and Women in the Church* (Zondervan, 2017).

46 Richard Allan Beck, *Unclean: Meditations on Purity, Hospitality, and Morality* (Wipf and Stock, 2011).

47 Chad Young, *Authenticity: Real Faith in a Phony, Superficial World* (IVP Books, 2011).

48 Robert A. Masters, *Spiritual Bypassing: When Spirituality Disconnects Us from What Really Matters* (North Atlantic Books, 2010); David Tresemer, "Spiritual Bypassing," *Lilipoh* 25 (2019): 16–20.

49 Audrey Barrick, "Youth Ministries Teaching Behavior Modification, Not Gospel?" *The Christian Post*, 2012, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/youth-ministries-teaching-behavior-modification-not-gospel.html>.

50 William F. Cox and Robert A. Peck, "Christian Education as Discipleship Formation," *Christian Education Journal* 15 (2018): 243–261; Brian Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship* (NavPress, 2006).

51 A more thorough discussion of this can be found in: Dean and Compton, "Holy Love."

52 Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Abingdon

we preach the truth of holiness, the need to avoid sexual sin, and the importance of finding one's identity in Christ alone, we also must love one another intensely and relentlessly, always extending God's grace and compassion to all.

While some people may be navigating sexual and gender identity, all of us are navigating some kind of concern, and all of us will find ourselves at some point grasping for identity outside of Christ. This is our common humanity. With humility, then, we must persist in encouraging one another, holding one another accountable, loving one another, and discipling one another. Remaining in this tension between a posture of love and a position of holiness will be hard, but as we hold this space, we give room for sexual and gender minorities to find a way to hold together their sexuality and gender with their faith.

In this tension, we trust the work of the Holy Spirit, knowing, as so well-articulated by Mulholland, "The process of being formed in the image of Christ takes place primarily at the points of our unlikeness to Christ's image. God is present to us in the most destructive aspects of our cultural captivity. God is involved with us in the most imprisoning bondage of our brokenness. God meets us in those places of our lives that are most alienated from God. God is there, in grace, offering us the forgiveness, the cleansing, the liberation, the healing we need to begin the journey toward our wholeness and fulfillment in Christ."⁵³ This healing, for all of us, occurs best within the context of Christian community.

Intentional Community

In our large national longitudinal study of sexual minorities, my research colleagues, Mark Yarhouse, Steve Stratton, and Michael Lastoria, and I listened to Christian sexual minority college students in interviews about what they needed from their colleges.⁵⁴ As we considered what they shared, we decided the word "intentionality" best captured the tenor across all the advice. We found this intentionality was focused in three areas: intentional security, intentional relationships, and intentional formation. As we consult with churches, teachers, and families, this approach provides a framework for walking with sexual and gender minorities in love, although this will need to be tailored to particular contexts.⁵⁵

Intentional Security

As we walk with our loved ones who are sexually and gender diverse, establishing safe relationships is essential. Relational security affords them the ability to be fully known, supported, loved, and given space to learn how to hold their sexual and gender identity together with their faith without threat of hostility or rejection.⁵⁶ This does not require the affirmation and celebration their sexual and gender diversity, rather it means this diversity does not threaten the relationship.

Safety in relationships begins even before our loved ones disclose their sexuality and gender and continues through the maintenance of that relationship. Initially, our loved ones have developed a sense of the degree to which our love and acceptance of them—and other sexual and gender minorities—is unconditional, and

Press, 2011), 9.

53 Mulholland, *Invitation*, 45.

54 Mark A. Yarhouse, Janet B. Dean, Stephen P. Stratton, and Michael A. Lastoria, *Listening to Sexual Minorities: A Study of Faith and Sexual Identity on Christian College Campuses* (IVP Academic, 2018); Janet B. Dean, Stephen P. Stratton, and Mark A. Yarhouse, "Becoming an Intentional Church Community: Relationships, Security, and Discipleship in Sexual Identity and Faith Development," *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry* 18(2) (2021): 232–251, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739891320948882>; Janet B. Dean, Stephen P. Stratton, and Mark A. Yarhouse, "Ministering to Families When Children Come Out," in *Ministering to Families in Crisis: An Essential Guide*, Jennifer S. Ripley, James N. Sells, and Diane J. Chandler, eds. (IVP Academic, 2024).

55 While this article discusses both sexual and gender minorities, it is important to note that our research is primarily focused on sexual minorities and that there seem to be important differences between sexual and gender minorities in terms of identity, psychological health, experience with others, expression of identity, etc.

56 Yarhouse et al., *Listening*, 299–305.

this perception of us will determine when and if they will disclose to us. Safety is reinforced if we receive their disclosure with respect and love rather than preaching, panicking, questioning, or rejecting.⁵⁷ Safety is maintained as we walk and support them as they navigate the tensions between sexual and gender identity and faith.

In our churches, safety can be found in their environment, structure, and attitudes.⁵⁸ In terms of environment, we want to ensure that our policies both enable pastoral care and provide physical, emotional, and spiritual protection within our theological framework and moral beliefs. The established boundaries around dress, names and pronouns, dating behavior, facility usage, and leadership roles should be fair, clear, and necessary without causing undue fear or rejection. Structurally, our churches need to move from family-centered ministries to ministries that are obviously inclusive of single people and families. Camps and retreats, particularly housing and facilities, should be planned in such a way that all feel welcomed and safe. Finally, we must challenge stereotypes, inappropriate joking, and judgmental, hateful speech within our congregations.

Intentionality in security will create a predictable and trustworthy atmosphere that reduces anxieties and fear-based

ways of being with one another.⁵⁹ The resulting securely attached relationships facilitate emotional regulation, behavioral self-control, and psychological health.⁶⁰ In addition, given that Christian families and churches often function as surrogates for God, their ability to create a felt sense of security instead of rejection can help individuals feel less distress and more security in their relationship with God.⁶¹

Intentional Relationships

Healthy, secure relationships in which people are respected and encouraged are critical for psychological health. For sexual and gender minorities, these relationships create a “holding environment” in which they can learn to hold together their faith and sexual and gender identity.⁶² To be intentionally relational, we must develop a posture that values people even when their positions disagree. Shared authenticity and mutual vulnerability also facilitate a sense of being known, which counters the shame and distress felt by sexual and gender minorities.⁶³ And, while eliminating hurtful speech creates safety, intentionally speaking “relational encouragements” to encourage the other, to express our gratitude for them, and to share our desire to live life together with them is critical in building trust and camaraderie.⁶⁴

57 Mark Yarhouse and Olya Zaporozhets, *When Children Come Out: A Guide for Christian Parents* (IVP Academic, 2022); Jeffrey Reed, Stephen P. Stratton, Gregory Koprowski, Christina Dillon, Janet B. Dean, Mark A. Yarhouse, Michael A. Lastoria, and Emma Bucher, “‘Coming Out’ to Parents in a Christian Context: A Consensual Qualitative Analysis of LGB Student Experiences,” *Counseling and Values* 65 (2020): 38–56, <http://doi.org/d3r5>.

58 Janet B. Dean, “Human Sexuality: A Pastoral Perspective” [three workshops], Leadership Development Initiative, Kansas City District, Church of the Nazarene, Kansas City, MO (Nov 2022); Janet B. Dean, “Intentionality in Christian Community: Ministry and Support for Sexual Minorities” [1.25 hour presentation], Joint Student Symposium, Departments of Psychology and School of Theology and Ministry, Indiana Wesleyan University, Marion, IN (Jan 2022).

59 Yarhouse et al., *Listening*, 299–305.

60 Mary D. S. Ainsworth et al, *Patterns of Attachment: A Psychological Study of the Strange Situation* (Routledge, 2015); Mario Mikulincer and Phillip R. Shaver, *Attachment in Adulthood: Structure, Dynamics, and Change* (Guilford Press, 2017).

61 Mikulincer and Shaver, “Attachment,” 479; P. Granqvist and L. A. Kirkpatrick, L. A., “Religion, Spirituality, and Attachment,” in *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality (Vol. 1): Context, Theory, and Research*, Kenneth I. Pargament, Julie J. Exline, and J. W. Jones, eds. (American Psychological Association, 2012): 139–155, <https://doi.org/10.1037/14045-007>; L. A. Kirkpatrick, *Attachment, Evolution and the Psychology of Religion* (Guilford Press, 2005); Dean et al., “Becoming,” 241–243.

62 Yarhouse et al., *Listening*, 292–296; Dean et al., “Becoming,” 239–241.

63 Curt Thompson, *The Soul of Shame: Retelling the Stories We Believe about Ourselves* (IVP, 2015).

64 Stephen P. Stratton, Jeffrey L. Reed, Janet B. Dean, Mark A. Yarhouse, K. Bledsoe, C. Dillon, D. Price, A. Sipe, and J. Sadusky, “The Impact of Micro-affirmations on a Sample of Sexual Minority

Sometimes parents fear that responding poorly to their child's disclosure will prevent a good relationship in the future, yet this is not what we have seen. The tenor of that disclosure conversation seems to have little determination of the later relationship⁶⁵ as there will be many opportunities to re-engage and listen. Parent-child relationships tend to be affected by several factors, including the child's desire to date, their church community, the child's safety, and conflict and polarization between the parents.⁶⁶ Yarhouse and Zaporozhets have found that parents who suspend judgment and productively communicate seem to navigate these obstacles better and maintain their relationships with their sexually and gender-diverse children.⁶⁷

Intentional Formation

Intentional formation fosters a discipling atmosphere in which people are "held" so that they can learn how to "hold" these complex aspects of personhood, faith, and sexual and gender identity.⁶⁸ We hope to do more than teach the right beliefs or help others to grow in their faith; rather, intentional formation is about "forming a certain kind of person, who is growing more into the image of Christ in all aspects of identity and life."⁶⁹ Most people are only willing to open up at these deeper levels

of identity in safe, supportive, and sometimes stretching relationships that provide the scaffolding for this self-searching and developmental process.⁷⁰

Here, we have conversations about faith, spiritual disciplines, and our place in God's story while also exploring sexuality and gender and how these might fit together with faith.⁷¹ Discussions about stewardship and ways of finding intimacy and meaning within that stewardship will be important, as will discernment of vocational singleness.⁷² A critical piece of this formational process is the development of self-acceptance, in which "the whole self is accepted as having created worth, no matter what personal reality may look like."⁷³ To get here, individuals often will need to work through shame around their sexual and gender identity,⁷⁴ practice lament as they express deep pain regarding what is and what might never be,⁷⁵ and learn to hold those parts of the self that they both favor and disfavor without having to affirm all of those parts or to capitulate to personal desire or experience.⁷⁶

We have proposed that self-acceptance, combined with grace to the self, are the dispositions needed for sexual and gender minorities to steward sexuality and gender within their faith.⁷⁷ Grace may be learned within relationships in

Students in Faith-based Higher Education" [Conference session], Kentucky Counseling Association Conference, Louisville, KY (Nov 2019).

65 Yarhouse and Zaporozhets, "When Children," 42–57; Reed et al., "'Coming Out,'" 38–56.

66 Yarhouse and Zaporozhets, "When Children," 42–57.

67 Yarhouse and Zaporozhets, "When Children," 42–57.

68 Yarhouse et al., *Listening*: 296–305.

69 Dean et al., "Becoming," 243.

70 Dean et al., "Becoming," 243; Mark A. Yarhouse, Stephen P. Stratton, and Janet B. Dean.

"Stewarding Diverse Sexual and Gender Identities," in *Stewarding Our Bodies: A Vision for Christian Student Affairs* (Abilene Christian University Press and Leafwood Publishers, 2023): 203.

71 Yarhouse et al., *Listening*, 296–305; Dean et al., "Becoming," 243–245.

72 Dean, "Human Sexuality;" Dean, "Intentionality in Christian Community;" Pieter Valk, "The Case for Vocational Singleness," *Christianity Today* (2020).

73 Yarhouse et al., *Stewarding*, 204; Janet B. Dean, Stephen P. Stratton, and Mark A. Yarhouse, "The Mediating Role of Self-acceptance in the Psychological Distress of Sexual Minority Students on Christian College Campuses," *Spirituality in Clinical Practice* 8(2), 2021: 132–148. <https://doi.org/10.1037/scp0000253>.

74 June Price Tangney and Rhonda L. Dearing, *Shame and Guilt* (Guilford, 2002); Yarhouse et al., *Stewarding*, 203.

75 Kelly M. Kapic, *Embodied Hope: A Theological Meditation on Pain and Suffering* (IVP, 2017).

76 Albert Ellis, "Changing Rational-emotive Therapy (RET) to Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT)," *Journal of Rational Emotive and Cognitive Behavior Therapy* 13, (1995): 85–89; Leon Seltzer, "The Path to Unconditional Self-Acceptance," *Psychology Today*, 2008, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/evolution-the-self/200809/the-path-unconditional-self-acceptance>.

77 Yarhouse et al., *Stewarding*, 209.

which people have “an unearned, refining, relational experience’ marked by ‘a state of embodied, nonjudgmental, all-encompassing acceptance.’”⁷⁸ While we often talk about grace we receive from others or God, psychologist Rodger Bufford and colleagues suggest grace may also be a way in which we engage with ourselves.⁷⁹ Grace, related to God, others, and the self, seems to foster psychological health, inner stability, relationships, and religious commitment, as well as diminish personal distress and shame.⁸⁰ Grace, however, is not the rejection of morals based upon

one’s faith, but rather it is a kindness to oneself when one falls short.⁸¹ This kind of loving posture of unconditional acceptance toward the self may be the mechanism by which individuals of faith can steward their sexuality and gender within the divinely ordained bounds.

individuals of faith can steward their sexuality and gender within the divinely ordained bounds.

Conclusion

While it may feel like the rapid societal changes around sexuality and gender are a threat to the Church, faithful sexual

and gender minorities, those committed to submitting their sexuality and gender identity to Christ, can be gifts to our faith communities. Yes, their struggles will stretch us, and their dependence on God will challenge our independence. As we walk with them intentionally in holy love, we become witnesses to their sanctifying journey as they walk with God and others and learn to steward their sexuality and gender.⁸² Their faith will strengthen our faith, and their presence will enrich our communities. If we miss this opportunity for living life together—whether because of our fear, our stubbornness, our apathy, or our acquiescence—we may miss experiencing a grander view of the holiness and love of God.

Additional Resources

Dean, J. B. “Helping Parents and Pastors Respond to Gender Identity Concerns in Children and Teens.” Podcast interview by A. Miller III, *More to the Story* (Nov 2022), <https://andymilleriii.com/articles/gender-dysphoria-a-pastoral-response-with-dr-janet-dean>.

Dean, J. B. (July 2019). “Living in the tension: Sexual identity and faith.” Podcast interview by J. Comstock, *The Discipleship Place*, The Church of the Nazarene, <http://bit.ly/3tgz9lh>.

78 Yarhouse et al., *Stewarding*, 208; Kyle T. Webster et al., “Experiences of Divine Grace Among Christian Friends,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 50(2), 2021: 203–205.

79 Rodger K. Bufford, Timothy A. Sisemore, and Amanda M. Blackburn, “Dimensions of Grace: Factor Analysis of Three Grace Scales,” *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 9(1), 2017: 276.

80 Adam S. Hodge, Joshua N. Hook, Don E. Davis, Daryl R. Van Tongeren, Rodger K. Bufford, Rodney L. Bassett, and Mark R. McMinn, “Experiencing Grace: A Review of the Empirical Literature,” *Journal of Positive Psychology* 17(3), 2022: 375–388; Yarhouse et al., *Stewarding*, 210; Bufford et al., “Dimensions of Grace,” 60.

81 Yarhouse et al., *Stewarding*, 211; Dean et al., “The Mediating Role,” 8–11.

82 Yarhouse et al., *Stewarding*.

If we miss this opportunity for living life together—whether because of our fear, our stubbornness, our apathy, or our acquiescence—we may miss experiencing a grander view of the holiness and love of God.



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