

Walking a Fine Line

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When I first launched the Institute for the Study of Sexual Identity (ISSI) several years ago, one image we used on our brochures was that of a person walking on a tightrope. The person was maintaining balance along a wire pulled tight and anchored between two points. We wanted to illustrate the challenge Christian sexual minorities face in finding balance between their sexual and religious identities. What I have found over the years is that they are not the only ones walking a fine line.

I want to thank each person who provided commentary on my article, "Round Peg, Square Hole: Being an Evangelical Christian in GLB Studies." The range of reactions reflects much of how people have responded to my work, with the exception of the most strident opposition, which I have also heard from both "sides" (for lack of a better word). In any case, if a tightrope walker relies on a pole or umbrella to attain equilibrium, the feedback of one's peers is often helpful in maintaining balance.

Andrew Comiskey appreciated the three-tier distinction between attraction, orientation, and identity, and this is a central set of concepts for how I approach the topic. At the same time, he asked whether I do not take change of orientation far enough and whether my emphasis on identity is a kind of "atonement" for the prior mistreatment of sexual minorities, but one that is itself "shackled by the limits of a purely psychological perspective." Perhaps. I would note that a focus on identity does not preclude the possibility of attractions or orientation changing over time (through natural fluidity or some other mechanism), but by expanding the emphasis from orientation to identity, it may protect the person from a narrow focus on orientation that can sometimes be painful if the person does not experience categorical change. In this sense, I think Andrew Comiskey and I agree that an emphasis on identity is ultimately the most important consideration. My own experience has been that translating psychological concepts, such as sexual identity, to theological concepts for the Christian, often brings us to theological and biblical anthropology, the *imago Dei*, and a discussion of Christ-likeness, which is very much in keeping with what I read in Andrew Comiskey's work.

Phil Henry made a slightly different observation, but one that had to do with instilling hope for change of orientation, and he wants this to be part of what Christians bring to the table that is a resource to the broader

community. The more we move beyond personal testimonies to a more public claim of categorical change (to bring something to the broader community), the more proponents and practitioners of reorientation therapy are obligated to conduct the research to support claims of success or the promise of change. I urge those who practice change of orientation therapy to document those changes in a more rigorous research methodology. How I read my own research on attempted change of orientation (which was not through therapy but through Christian ministries) is that the results rebut the *cynical pessimism* of those who say that no one has ever experiencing meaningful shifts in their attractions or orientation. But the other side of the debate is often *arrogant optimism*: that anyone who tries hard enough or has enough faith can change. What I argue for is *realistic hope* (or, in Christian circles, realistic biblical hope), by which I mean that while meaningful gains may be experienced by some people, most people do not report categorical shifts from homosexuality to heterosexuality. Ultimately, what Phil Henry and I share in common is a concern for client well-being, but we are approaching what it means to protect client well-being differently. Henry uses motivational interviewing to protect the client from undue pessimism; I use advanced informed consent to protect the client from unrealistic expectations (too high a standard of success given the likelihood of 180-degree change). Having said that, I want to hold my present understanding with humility, recognizing that there is just not that much current research upon which to draw. If those who advocate the role of motivational interviewing in changing sexual orientation (or preparing a person to anticipate or experience such change in a therapy or ministry) would conduct a series of studies demonstrating the positive gains toward categorical change, then such an option would have a more prominent place at the table, at least among moderate voices in the mental health fields whose decision-making is driven largely by research findings.

Reading Kathleen Ritter's commentary reminded me of an exchange I had several years ago. At that time, I was writing up the results of a study of Christian sexual minorities who did not identify as gay, and a lesbian psychologist agreed to review my work and help me strengthen my writing. She raised a question that has stayed with me for years now. She asked, "How do people

form an identity with a negative (that is, *not being gay*)? And is it sustainable over time?" Kathleen Ritter raised a similar concern in her commentary: "Over the long haul, however, people must find ways to integrate various identities without shame or self-loathing, and to reframe them in a positive light." I think this is a critical issue for psychologists who support a conservative sexual ethic. The difficulties here actually fuel the emphasis on change of orientation, in my view. The positive that people seem to want to offer is heterosexuality. But if heterosexuality is elusive, incomplete, or (in many cases) unattainable, what then? I think the answer has to come not from me, but from Christian sexual minorities who come to terms with celibacy. My experience with them has been that those who do live out celibacy do so in close Christian community and think of their sexuality not in terms of genital sexual acts (anatomy) but more broadly, as when Lewis Smedes in his book, *Sex for Christians*, discusses sexuality in terms of *gender sexuality* (being male or female), *erotic sexuality* (the longing for completion in another), and *genital sexuality* (what a person does behaviorally). It appears to be the longing for completion in another that is critical, as Christians view that as always incomplete, even in marriage, and only ultimately realized in relationship with God. That is a mystery that is beyond me, but it is an area for further understanding and discourse, as well as research. We have to understand those who commit themselves to this life trajectory, who value telic congruence (living according to one's values and spiritual strivings) over organismic congruence (living according to one's biological impulses), to hear their experiences and the challenges they face, as well as the moments of greater clarity, insight, and peace. This is a concern that extends beyond the sexual minority to single heterosexual Christians who are sexual beings and who find ways to respond to their own impulses and to this broader view of sexuality in light of their deeply-held religious beliefs and values.

As with the other commentaries, those from Jeffrey Eckert, H. Newton Malony, Gary Strauss, and Warren Throckmorton reflected an appreciation for the work that has been done to build bridges and practice "convicted civility" in writing, research, and professional relationships. Jeffrey Eckert suggested there is benefit to be gained from defining terms, especially what attraction means. I am not sure I have defined the term attraction before, but I would certainly want to recognize the multi-faceted dimensions such as emotional/romantic and sexual/physical dimensions mentioned in his commentary. Jeffrey Eckert also raised the question about volition, as I indicated that "most" people "find themselves" experiencing same-sex attraction (in contrast to a claim about volition). I qualify with "most" to make room for experiences like those of Sue Wilkinson, a professor at Loughborough University, who shared the following: "I was

never unsure about my sexuality throughout my teens or 20s. I was a happy heterosexual and had no doubts. Then I changed, through political activity and feminism, spending time with women's organisations. It opened my mind to the possibility of a lesbian identity." (http://women.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/women/relationships/article2002552.ece)

Newt Malony encourages us to both *Mind the Gap* and *Mind the Store*. He joins other commentators in recognizing the difference between a line of research and Christian convictions. I heartily agree that these two things—while important and in relationship to one another (what I would envision as integration)—are not the same thing, but science and religion, psychology and Christianity, can be in a meaningful dialogue provided that each understand the other and their own identity and purpose. I genuinely appreciate Malony's pastoral heart toward those who experience same-sex attraction. He brings a good word to help all of us remember the *person*, as well as the importance of the place of *grace* in all of our lives.

Gary Strauss offered an interesting image that I have actually used to describe the early stage of my career: "that it is wise to hold one's beliefs in an open and slightly cupped hand." That is actually how I described my transition from graduate school at Wheaton College to my first several years of work at Regent University, when, as an assistant professor, I was making decisions about lines of research. I think by holding this whole area in an open and slightly cupped hand, it has helped me not to have too much of my "self" invested in the topic or my own views, etc., but to be a little more dispassionate in my writing and conference presentations. This has actually helped foster some good will with those who are moderate voices, but who disagree with me on matters of sexual ethics.

Warren Throckmorton has been in several of the sessions I referenced in my original paper, and I was glad that he could flesh them out a little more and give credit to those who engaged us in several early exchanges of ideas. He reminds all of us that there is more work to be done in this important area, and that real people are on the other end of these discussions. As Richard Mouw would say, we do well to practice our work with convicted civility.

The topics of homosexuality and sexual identity lend themselves to polarized debates. But there is also in all of this an opportunity for those who are willing to walk a tightrope, for those who seek a balance so that they can help others find balance. Make no mistake: there are plenty of people on either side to pull you in either direction, and there is a need for balancing tools, such as the wisdom of one's colleagues. I again wish to thank each contributor for his or her thoughtful reflection and commentary.