

**“Homosexuality: The Use Of Scientific Research In the Church’s Moral Debate”**  
**Stanton L. Jones**  
**Wheaton College**

The following is a summary of key concepts from an hour-long presentation at the CCCU Consultation on Human Sexuality (11/16/04). I summarized there the arguments made in our book (Jones & Yarhouse, 2000), in several cases extending them with research published since the publication of that book. This brief report repeats (or quotes) arguments we have made elsewhere. The main focus of the presentation was to establish that there is nothing persuasive presented in contemporary scientific research that renders invalid the classical ethical judgment of the Christian Church about homosexual conduct. I begin with a brief overview of the Christian perspective on sexual ethics, emphasizing that the issue of homosexual conduct is but one of many areas where God has instructed his people not to engage in conduct which violates his will.

**I. Foundations for the Traditional Christian Sexual Ethic:**

**A. There is a broad and positive view of sexuality of the Bible. Further, the Bible teaches a general sexual ethic congruent with this basic positive stance toward sexuality. Moral condemnation of homosexual conduct is one among many specific aspects of the sexual ethic.**

**Biblical View of Sexuality:** Human beings are *sexual, male and female, physical* beings by creational intent, and these realities are blessed as a creational good (“it is very good,” Genesis 1:31). Our sexuality is a good gift from God. The consummation of a heterosexual marriage in sexual intercourse has been viewed as creating a divinely-blessed and intended outcome, a “one flesh” *union* between wife and husband. There is an objective nature to this union; we first learn of this in the Creation story in Genesis 2:24, hear Jesus ground his teaching on divorce and adultery on this truth in Matthew 19:5, and see the Apostle Paul ground his teaching against sexual immorality in this teaching. Sexual union has an objective nature in that sexual intercourse has *fixed meanings* or produces fixed outcomes regardless of the intentions (subjective) of the actors (I Corinthians 6:12-17). Additionally, sexual union between a man and woman appears to serve at least four purposes: *Procreation* (Genesis 1:28), *Union* (Genesis 2:24; Mark 10:2-12; I Corinthians 6:12-20); *Physical gratification and pleasure* (I Corinthians 7:1-9, Proverbs 5:18-19); and *Instruction* about our incompleteness and dependence (Ephesians 5:31-33).

Our sexual nature, however, cannot be celebrated only as good, given the reality of human sinfulness. The original human pair rebelled against God, and all of humanity have since borne the brunt of the consequences of that rebellion. Our sexuality, like the entirety of our character, is broken and twisted. We experience desires, motives, feelings, and impulses that were never intended by God and which in fact grieve God. As a result, we cannot even trust our own impulses to guide us to that which is good, and we cannot celebrate everything we experience or desire as a gift from God. It was because of this brokenness that God chose to reveal clearly His moral will to counter and correct our

capacity for delusion. In his grace, he did far more than merely reveal his moral will (which we could never perfectly live up to), but has offered his own Son who died on the cross and rose in victory over sin and death, and through whom we have redemption and can begin the process of being transformed into the persons God intended for us to be.

**Sexual Ethic:** The Bible speaks with a unified voice about sexual ethics. The biblical options concerning full sexual intimacy are two: fidelity in marriage or chastity in singleness. The sexual behaviors and patterns which are judged immoral in scripture are, in rough order of their appearance: adultery (Exodus 20:14 and many other passages), incest (Leviticus 18:6-18, 20:11-22), homosexual intercourse (Leviticus 18:22, 20:13, Romans 1:26-27, I Corinthians 6:9; I Timothy 1:8-11), bestiality (Leviticus 20:15-16), rape (Deuteronomy 22:23-29), lust (Matthew 5:28), and fornication (I Corinthians 6:9 or Acts 15). While sexual sin may rightly be described as no different from or no more heinous than other sins (after all, such sexual sins appear as one among many entries in the various “vice lists” in the Scriptures, e.g., Gal. 5:19-21), scripture also puts particular emphasis on sexual purity, urging us to “flee sexual immorality” and stating explicitly that sexual sin is unlike any other type of sin in that it produces a personal union disapproved by God and that is a sin against our own bodies, which are the temple of the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 6:15-20).

## **B. The Bible, the authoritative Word of God, is clear in its condemnation of homosexual conduct.**

This condemnation is not a major focus of scripture (the major passages are Leviticus 18:22, 20:13, Romans 1:26-27, I Corinthians 6:9; I Timothy 1:8-11), but the condemnation of homosexual conduct in these passages is pervasive (every time it is mentioned), absolute (with no exceptions), and severe (homosexual conduct is regarded as an egregious violation of God’s will; see Gagnon).

## **II. Does “Science” Invalidate the Traditional Teaching?**

**The Argument:** Some argue (more often implicitly than explicitly) that the clear and unequivocal findings of modern science have provided the foundation to correct the confused Biblical teachings, and that these findings make necessary the full acceptance of homosexual conduct as moral.

**Response:** Often, this argument is made with a great deal of hand-waving and very few specifics. A full rebuttal of this argument is the subject of our book, *Homosexuality: The Use of Scientific Research in the Church’s Moral Debate*. Our basic conclusion after a full review of the best scientific evidence in four key areas is that a) the scientific evidence is much less clear and conclusive than the lay public typically believes, and is far from persuasive, and b) the logic by which the scientific evidences are applied to the moral problem of homosexuality are most often deeply flawed and confused. We survey the scientific evidence in four areas: prevalence, causation, the question of whether it is a “mental illness,” and the evidence of whether change is possible. We conclude that there is nothing in the evidence of science today that would force the Christian Church to

change its moral teaching. In what follows, only direct citations are documented; for more detailed references, see Jones & Yarhouse (2000).

**A. PREVALENCE**—How common is homosexuality?

The essential claim in discussions about prevalence is that the high prevalence of homosexuality, claimed to be 10% or more of the general population, demands revision of our traditional ethic. First, it must be said that the widely presumed estimate of 10% is without foundation in the best scientific research. The famous 10% figure is now admitted to have been an inflation of existing prevalence estimates, one designed to also inflate the political significance of the homosexual population. The 10% estimate was referenced to a specific table in Alfred Kinsey’s study of male sexual behavior, where it was reported that 10% of the male population engaged exclusively in homosexual behavior for at least 3 years, but the meaningfulness of this statistic is clouded by the acknowledged sampling problems of Kinsey’s research (he vastly oversampled, for instance, prison inmates who, if they had sexual experiences at all, would have had them “homosexually” during their term of imprisonment).

The best studies suggest lower prevalence rates. The following table summarizes the findings of the best large-scale, representatively sampled study of adult sexuality in America. We face vexing definitional issues when we attempt to answer the prevalence question. The answer to the question “How many people are homosexual?” depends on how we define “homosexual.” Note that the three different research questions (Do you self-identify as heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual or other? Do you experience attraction to the same gender? Does same-gender sex sound appealing?) yield three different prevalence rates. The best general conclusion from this and many other studies of prevalence of homosexual orientation appears to be that male homosexuality characterizes about 3 to 4 % of adults, and that female homosexuality characterizes about 1 to 2 % of adults. It is fascinating that the finding that female homosexuality occurs at roughly half the rate of male homosexuality is a robust one duplicated in study after study.

	Males	Females
Self-Identification	2.0% Homosexual; 0.8% Bisexual; 0.3% “Other”	0.9% Homosexual; 0.5% Bisexual; 0.1% “Other”
Same Gender Attraction	6.2%	4.2%
Same Gender Sex Sounds Appealing	4.5%	5.6%

Laumann, E., Gagnon, J., et al., *The social organization of sexuality* (U. of Chicago Press, 1994).

What of the logical relevance of findings about prevalence for our moral judgment? Prevalence, regardless of the findings (2% or 72%) has no obvious strong implications for our moral judgment; some sins are common, others uncommon. Christians believe that some sinful life patterns are virtually ubiquitous, such as pride, while some are infrequent, like bestiality.

## **B. CAUSATION—What causes homosexuality?**

The major areas of scientific study looking at possible causes of the homosexual condition examine 1) genetics; 2) prenatal hormones; 3) brain structure; and 4) psychological and environmental factors. These options are not exclusive (i.e., genetic, hormonal, brain and environmental factors can all be present and interact). In the following, I focus mostly on the crucial (because so many take it to be persuasive) issue of genetic causation.

Many well meaning people reason in something like the following way: “The Bible condemns homosexuality, but science has proven that homosexuality is genetic. Something that is genetic is not voluntary and if it’s not voluntary it can’t be a sin. Therefore the Bible and the traditional Christian sexual ethic are simply wrong.” This argument is wrong logically and it’s wrong scientifically. It is wrong logically because the Bible does not condemn “homosexuality,” but condemns homosexual acts. Those acts are voluntary, as persons with homosexual attractions are not robots driven uncontrollably by their impulses; they choose whether or not to act in any given situation. In any case, historic Christian theology has never made ‘voluntariness’ a condition of sin. All of us are sinful and prone to sin as part of our basic condition and natures. We cannot choose otherwise; we cannot choose not to be sinful.

How is this argument wrong scientifically? The public believes homosexuality is genetic largely due to media coverage that has trumpeted this conclusion. The February 24, 1992 Newsweek magazine had a cover picture of a baby’s face with the headline “Is this child gay?” Coverage like this has convinced the public of the genetic cause of homosexuality. This 1992 story was the result of two major scientific studies in 1991. The first was a controversial study by respected neuroscientist Simon LeVay claiming to have found brain structure differences between gay and straight men. This controversial study had many methodological weaknesses and has never been clearly replicated. It is of unclear standing. But no single set of studies did more to establish in the public mind that homosexuality is genetic than several behavioral genetics studies by Bailey, Pillard, and their collaborators.

Behavioral genetics helps us to understand the degree of influence that genetics has on behavior and psychological patterns. This field is producing fascinating findings, but findings that are commonly misunderstood. The basic logic of behavioral genetics says that if a behavioral or psychological pattern is influenced by genetics, then individuals who are more genetically similar should also be more similar behaviorally or psychologically than individuals who are less similar genetically. So if a psychological pattern (such as anxiety) is genetically influenced, identical twins ought to be more alike on that variable than fraternal twins, since identical twins are genetically identical and fraternal twins share a lower level of genetic similarity, the same as normal brothers and sisters. Bailey and Pillard wanted to gauge the impact of genetics on homosexual orientation. They gathered a research sample of homosexuals and their siblings and looked at the degree of concordance or matching of sexual orientation according to different patterns of genetic similarity. Their results are summarized here:

	Bailey & Pillard MALES	Bailey, Pillard, et al. FEMALES
Monozygotic (Identical) Twins	“29/56” 52% PC	“34/71” 48% PC
Dizygotic (Fraternal) Twins	“12/54” 22% PC	“6/37” 16% PC
Non-Twin Siblings	“13/142” 9% PC	“10/73” 14% PC
Adopted Siblings	“6/57” 11% PC	“2/35” 6% PC

J. M. Bailey, and R. C. Pillard. (1991). “A genetic study of male sexual orientation,” *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 48, 1081-1096.

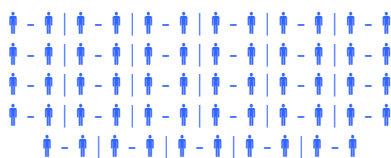
J. M. Bailey, R. C. Pillard, M. C. Neale, & Y. Agyei. (1993). “Heritable factors influence sexual orientation in women,” *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 50, 217-223.

As the findings for female homosexuals were essentially the same as for men, I will focus only on the findings for males. Bailey and Pillard demonstrated greater (“29/56;” 52%) concordance or matching between identical twins that share 100% of their genes than between fraternal twins, regular brothers, and adopted siblings. This would appear to be the type of pattern (more genetic similarity, more orientation similarity) that you would find if there is a genetic component to homosexual orientation. This study got enormous publicity when it was published, like the Newsweek cover story.

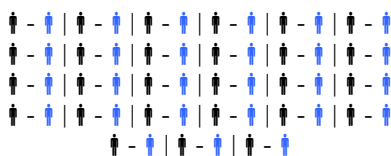
But note three problematic things about this study. First, the 52% Probandwise concordance rate clearly indicates that this is at most a genetic **influence** and not a genetic **cause**. If homosexuality was genetically caused in the same way eye or hair color are caused, the concordance should be 100%, not 50%. This kind of influence is a type of causation, but as laypersons use the term “cause” they imagine complete determination of orientation, and this is not what was found. The 52% finding indicates that factors other than genetics must also be at work.

Second, many people misunderstand what Bailey and Pillard actually found. We think that what “29/56” means is that they found 56 twin pairs of which about half the pairs were both gay (left “Perception” column below), but what they actually found was is displayed in the right-hand column:

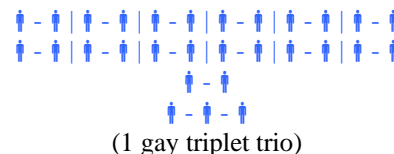
**PERCEPTION:**  
**56 twin pairs total**  
 29 “matched” twin pairs (both twins were gay):



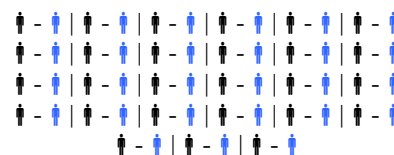
27 “non-matched” twin pairs (where only one twin was gay):



**REALITY:**  
**41 twin pairs total**  
 13 “matched” twin pairs (both twins were gay):



27 “non-matched” twin pairs (where only one twin was gay):



In this display, the light or blue figures represent gay brothers, and the black ones heterosexual brothers. Of 41 pairs total, they found 14 matched groups (13 twin pairs and one triplet trio), and 27 twin pairs that did not match. This misunderstanding is the result of the statistical definition they used. Bailey did not report regular percentages, but reported *Probandwise Concordances*. While there are tedious definitional and statistical issues here, a simple summary is the following: Probandwise Concordances involve counting matches for every homosexual person, so whenever there is a twin pair that matches, you have *two* matches (one match for each gay brother). A simple example will illustrate: If we have only two twin pairs, one with both twins gay (A & B, with A counting as a match for B *and* B counting as a match for A), and the other with only one gay twin (which counts as a single non-match for the one gay twin), we do not have a 50% Probandwise Concordance as many would expect but rather a 67% Probandwise Concordance (2 matches divided by 3 possibilities to match (2 matches plus one non-match)). So instead of the common understanding that Bailey studied 56 total identical twin pairs, with 29 pairs matching for homosexuality and 27 not matching ( $29/56 = 52\%$ ), what Bailey really found in those early studies was 41 pairs total with 27 pairs that did not match for sexual orientation, 13 that matched as twin gay pairs (13 pairs yields 26 gay persons with a match = 26 matches), and one triplet matched set who were all gay (3 matches), yielding 29 matches total, divided by 29 matches + 27 failures to match, resulting in  $29/56$  or 52% Probandwise Concordance.

But the third and deepest problem with the early Bailey and Pillard studies was their samples. If you're going to give a good estimate of genetic influence in a population, you must have a truly representative sample of that population. The samples for the Bailey and Pillard studies were gathered by advertising in gay publications in the Chicago area, with the result that there was absolutely no guarantee that the sample was a good representation of the general homosexual population. Because their sample was not guaranteed to be representative, there was the chance that they got a biased sample that overrepresented genetic influence. For instance, it is credible to believe that homosexual persons who favored a genetic explanation for their experience and whose family was more consistent with a genetic hypothesis were more likely to volunteer for the study than those whose family patterns did not favor such an explanation.

Thankfully, Bailey realized this might be a problem and did a study that corrected this sample problem. He went to the one place where you are guaranteed to get a truly representative sample: the Australian twin registry, which registers every twin pair born in the entire country. He administered a questionnaire about sexual orientation and behavior to the entire twin population. When he did this study, his original finding was almost completely wiped out. Here are the findings of the new Bailey studies (right column) compared to the original findings:

	Bailey & Pillard 1991 MALES	Bailey, Dunne, & Martin, 2000 MALES
Monozygotic (Identical) Twins	“29/56” 52% PC	3 of 27 pairs 20% PC
Dizygotic (Fraternal) Twins	“12/54” 22% PC	0 of 16 pairs 0% PC
Non-Twin Siblings	“13/142” 9% PC	Not Reported
Adopted Siblings	“6/57” 11% PC	Not Reported

Bailey & Pillard (1991). “A genetic study of male sexual orientation,” *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 48, 1081-1096.  
 J. M. Bailey, M. P. Dunne, & N. G. Martin. (2000). “Genetic and environmental influences on sexual orientation and its correlates in an Australian twin sample,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78 (3), 524-536.

Probandwise concordance for identical twins in this representative sample dropped from 52% to only 20%. Of 27 identical twin pairs, only 3 matched for homosexual orientation. Bailey, Dunne, and Martin (2000, p.534) are precise about the implications of their new research, commenting that this study “did not provide statistically significant support for the importance of genetic factors” for homosexual orientation. Further, they admitted that “This suggests that concordances from prior studies [i.e., his own two prior studies] were inflated due to concordance dependent ascertainment bias” (or, in other words, sample bias). And whereas his original findings got enormous media attention, his new findings have been completely ignored by the media and most Introduction to Psychology textbooks.

Thus, we find the scientific evidence for the power of genetic causation to be modest at best. We do not discount the influence of genetics (or indeed other biological factors such as prenatal hormones); genetic factors may well be part of the mix of causation for some individuals, but the simplistic argument that “my genes made me gay” does not stand in light of the best scientific evidence. After extensive scientific effort, it appears that 1) genetics is at most a weak influence in causing homosexuality, 2) if genetic influences exist, they are involved only in some forms of homosexuality, and 3) any genetic influence is on inclination or disposition only, not on behavior.

And this brings us to the mirror opposite of the contemporary (and mistaken) enthusiasm for biological explanations of causation, that being the dismissal of evidence that environmental factors are involved in the causation of homosexual orientation. A large literature exists suggesting the role of environmental (including familial) factors in the causation of homosexual orientation, but these studies (many of mixed quality) are dismissed cavalierly today. Brief review of a newer study in this genre will illustrate: Bearman and Brückner (2002) analyzed an enormous database generated by detailed interviews and surveys of many tens of thousands of American adolescents. They looked for patterns of family experience that resulted in increased likelihoods of the adolescent reporting homosexual attraction. Their findings:

Relationship to other siblings	% Homosexual Attraction	N (all males)
Opposite sex twin	16.8%	185
Same sex twin DZ	9.8%	276
Same sex twin MZ	9.9%	262
Opposite sex full sibling	7.3%	427
Same sex full sibling	7.9%	596
Other (nonrelated, half-siblings)	10.6%	832

Bearman, P. S., & Brückner, H. (2002) Opposite-sex twins and adolescent same-sex attraction. *American Journal of Sociology*, 107 (5), 1179-1205.

The authors argue that the base rate of same-sex attraction in this study is around 7.5%. They found one constellation of family relationships, however, that resulted in rates of same-sex attraction approximately double the base rate, and that was when a male sibling was a part of a fraternal (dizygotic) twin pair where his co-twin was a sister. In their words: “we show that adolescent male opposite-sex (hereafter OS) twins are *twice as likely* as expected to report same-sex attraction, and that the pattern of concordance (similarity across pairs) of same-sex preference for sibling pairs does not suggest genetic influence independent of the social context” (p. 1181). Stating their interpretation of these findings simplistically, they hypothesize that same-sex attraction is the result of incomplete gender socialization, and that the task of parental gender socialization of children is significantly complicated when parents are confronted with accomplishing gender socialization when a boy-girl twin pair (“opposite-sex twins”) are born to them. Parents trying to raise their boy to fully embrace masculine identity face special challenges when that boy has a twin sister.

Bearman and Brückner argue that an additional finding of their study further supports their interpretations: If the problem is incomplete gender socialization, then any family pattern that reinforces gender socialization should diminish the effect. And this is what they found: when the male OS co-twin has an older brother (with whom the parents would have already honed their gender socialization skills), the elevation of same-sex attraction was wiped out; without an older brother present, the same-sex attraction rate more than doubled. “Among male OS twins, the proportion reporting a same-sex romantic attraction is twice as high among those without older brothers (18.7%) than among those with older brothers (8.8%)” (p. 1196). They argue that their results “support the hypothesis that less gendered socialization in early childhood and preadolescence shapes subsequent same-sex romantic preferences” (p. 1181).

This is only a sample of the complex and challenging array of etiological research into homosexual orientation. It is curious to see that conservative Christians are much more comfortable with evidence of environmental causation (such as a history of abuse, or the finding above of opposite-sex twins) than they are with evidence of biological causation. Such comfort seems unwarranted, as the deterministic assumptions behind the research are essentially the same, and findings of environmental causation may no more open the door to the possibility of change than biological findings. But what of the relevance of these findings to the moral question? We have argued that the relevance is moot.

Quoting and paraphrasing from our book (Jones & Yarhouse, pp. 88-90):

Christian thinkers should reject a false and easy dichotomy between free choice and utterly determined causation.

- There are actually gradations in our capacities to make choices. A little child does not have the capacity to exercise the kind of patience and self-restraint that a mature adult can manifest; the child must be trained to be able to exhibit such patterns. Further, the person who thoughtlessly cultivates bad habits is actually slowly undermining their capacity to make other, better choices as the sheer momentum of his or her destructive patterns gain power over his or her life.
- Many are confused with how “choice” can be meaningful when it is shown to be linked to “genetic causation.” One study found a genetic influence in television viewing: the television viewing patterns of adopted children had more in common with that of their genetic/biological parents than of their adopted parents! This finding helps to put the genetic evidence into perspective. All of us would reject the notion that our genes make us sit for a certain number of hours in front of a television screen, but what our genes may do is give us a predisposition of some sort (sedentary tendencies?) which would make the choice to view television more or less appealing to certain people. What may be inherited, then, is how much we are prone to like and choose television viewing over other things.

Putting these arguments together, we can argue that *science has not eliminated responsibility for sexual behavior*. The church’s moral concern is not fundamentally with homosexual orientation, no matter how it develops. We do not fully understand what a sexual orientation is, but from a moral perspective, from a Christian perspective, it may best be understood as one among the many ways in which we humans, sinful and fallen as we are, are inclined to lean toward choices and patterns that do not bring honor to God. The church’s moral concern is with what one does with one’s experiences of same-sex attraction. Only in the case of extreme biological determination at the level of individual acts would moral culpability be seen as obliterated. Homosexual persons are not sub-human robots whose acts are predetermined. They are moral agents who inherit tendencies from biology and environment, and who share in shaping their character by the responses they make to their life situations. Like all persons, they must ask, “This is what I want to do, but is it what I should do?” The existence of inclinations or predispositions does not erase the need for moral evaluation of those inclinations.

### **C. PSYCHOPATHOLOGY—Is it a “mental illness”?**

It is commonly (and informally) argued that the Church’s case that homosexual conduct is immoral is somehow weakened by the decision of the major mental health organizations to remove the homosexual condition from the list of diagnosable “mental illnesses.” Further, it is commonly argued that this removal somehow constitutes a formal declaration that “homosexuality is normal” and that the orientation has no

negative mental health entailments. In our book, we summarized research addressing this complex set of arguments.

The key points are these: First, homosexual orientation is associated with increased risk for negative psychological symptomatology. We summarized (pp. 101ff) a number of major studies reporting significantly elevated rates among homosexual persons compared to the general population of depression, anxiety, suicidality, substance addiction and abuse (alcohol and drugs), and general distress. Months after the publication of our book, the lead journal in the field of psychology published a review on the subject of “lesbians and gay men’s mental health: Does sexual orientation really matter?” by an award-winning lesbian psychologist/epidemiologist, Susan Cochran. Cochran’s conclusion was in line with our own review of this literature: “in all these studies researchers found some evidence for elevated risk when lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals are compared with heterosexual respondents” (p. 934). The reader should note just how unusual it is in the social scientific literature for an esteemed reviewer to use the absolute term “all” in summarizing a finding: “in *all* these studies researchers found some evidence for elevated risk. . .”

Cochran, though, argued for a specific hypothesis in explanation of these findings. The cause of the elevated mental health problems of lesbians and gay men was the stress of living in a heterosexist social environment. Interestingly, in the same year that her review was published, another study was published that could be regarded as an empirical test of her hypothesis. If societal rejection is the cause of elevated distress rates, then it would be expected that distress rates would be diminished in a societal context that was more accepting than American society. Theo Sandfort and his colleagues published a study of mental health in the Netherlands focusing on the experience of lesbians and gay men, but found essentially the same pattern noted by Cochran: “Psychiatric disorders were more prevalent among homosexually active people compared with heterosexually active people” (p. 85). So in summary, the research to date continues to suggest evidence of significantly increased distress rates in homosexual populations, and there is evidence to suggest that something more than societal rejection is involved. The mental health patterns of homosexual persons, on average, are more problematic than for heterosexuals. (This, of course, does not mean that individual homosexual persons are necessarily more “distressed” at any given time; there are many such non-distressed persons.)

A second key finding: A number of disturbing behavioral patterns have emerged in the empirical research on homosexual populations. Relational instability is common; gay and lesbian couples are much more transitory than heterosexual couples. For male homosexual persons, highly elevated levels of sexual experimentation are common. Even among “monogamous gay couples” sexual experience outside of the couple is common; one study in the Netherlands found that each partner in a stable gay couple averaged seven *other* sexual partners in the year of the survey besides their stable partner (p. 110 in Jones & Yarhouse).

Again, the relevance of this research to the moral question for Christians is not strong. There are many patterns that the Scriptures deem sinful that are not mental health

problems (sorcery, idolatry), and there are many mental health problems that are not sins (depression, schizophrenia). Sins are not the same things as “emotional problems.” And the documentation of troubling behavioral patterns associated with homosexual practice (such as promiscuity) are not to be understood as the reasons for the Church’s moral judgment, any more than the reason adultery is wrong is that it breaks up marriages. Adultery is wrong because God has declared it so, as he has homosexual practice as well.

#### **D. MUTABILITY—Is change possible?**

In our book, we review the research over decades on the possibility of change in homosexual orientation, concluding that every study ever conducted on change from homosexuality to heterosexuality has claimed some successes. Reported success rates, however, are not dramatic, ranging from 25% to 50%. In a logically perverse way, however, many commentators have interpreted the modest success rates as evidence that change is impossible, resulting in the common claim that homosexual orientation is “immutable.” Further, older studies are dismissed for inadequate methodology and as animated by heterosexist bias.

Our brief reply on these issues is:

- The modest success rates for change of homosexual orientation are not meaningfully different from those generated in treatment of such difficult conditions as the sexual perversions such as pedophilia (sexual attraction to children), the addictions, and what have been called personality disorders. A low success rate is not the same as no success, and indeed a low success rate may well be expected if the causes of the condition being treated are complex and deep.
- The dismissal of the older studies on the basis of inadequate methodology seems questionable. Those studies met the scholarly standards of their day for publication. Fairness would seem to call for a similar dismissal of all psychotherapeutic studies of an earlier generation (many of which still serve as the presumptive research base for contemporary methods), but these critiques are quite selective.
- The claim that earlier studies of change can be dismissed because they are animated by heterosexist bias is essentially an *ad hominem* argument.
- Finally, there is a curious lack of balance in the negative critique of this research by gay-affirming scholars. These reviewers often sing the praises of gay-affirming therapies while dismissing the past research on change. Susan Cochran is again helpful here in stating bluntly that “outcome studies documenting the efficacy of affirmative therapies have not been done (p. 940). So we are in a curious situation where literally dozens of published studies are dismissed as irrelevant (or worse, treated as if they do not even exist) while an approach to therapy is extolled *for which no published empirical support exists at all*.”

Since the publication of our book, one extraordinary study has been published by a most surprising author. Robert Spitzer, eminent research psychiatrist and (commonly regarded as) the architect of the removal of the homosexual condition from the listing of diagnosable mental health conditions, published a study of success cases in homosexual

orientation change. So controversial was this study that the journal *Archives of Sexual Behavior* published a massive number of “peer commentaries” with the research report, almost all hostile to the study. Indeed, the Spitzer study does not qualify as a psychotherapy outcomes study, focusing as it does on a *post hoc* examination of self-declared success stories. But this criticism fails to do justice to the intent of the study. Spitzer was exploring an empirical test of the common wisdom: If it is commonly assumed that “homosexual orientation is immutable” then any demonstration of the possibility of change stands as a logical refutation of the absolute claim that change is impossible. By analogy, the absolute claim that “all crows are black” requires for its refutation not that a lot of crows of another color are found, but only that at least one crow of another color be found. So it is that Spitzer’s findings do nothing to establish how effective change therapy is, but it conclusively establishes that the claim “no homosexual person can change their orientation” is false.

The body of research in this area, in our view, establishes the possibility of change by means of psychotherapy for some individuals. It does not suggest that change is possible for all. But what of the relevance of this area for the moral question? Again quoting or paraphrasing from our book, at times the debates about counseling and the homosexual make it sound like the Church has no right to believe that homosexual action is immoral unless psychotherapy works and works often. We do not believe that this is the crucial question at all. When the Apostle Paul said “that is what some of you were” (I Cor. 6:11), we have no assurance that he meant that the former “homosexual offenders” he was referring to were all fully converted to heterosexuality and happily married. Paul himself was a celibate single man, called his condition a blessed one, and wished his condition on others. Is it too much to believe, then, that what Paul had in mind for the former homosexual offenders was chastity in singleness and freedom from their former sexual enslavement to sin? Would not a person be deemed to have changed who went from promiscuous sexual license (of a homosexual variety) to chaste singleness after the model of Christ and of Paul? From this perspective, Christians who contend with homosexuality are not required to change their sexual orientation; nor are they promised such change. It is consistent with the character of God as revealed in the Christian scriptures to understand that His desire for us is costly discipleship that frees us from being driven by our longings for happiness and personal gratification of our sexual “needs.” What does Christianity mean when it holds out that change of the homosexual condition is possible? It may mean for some healing toward full and joyous experience of heterosexual love, but it may also mean for others release from bondage to a sinful life pattern in favor of life of chastity, joy and holiness.

#### **GENERAL CONCLUSION REGARDING SCIENCE AND SCRIPTURE:**

First, “while science provides us with many interesting and useful perspectives on sexual orientation and behavior, the best science of this day fails to persuade the thoughtful Christian to change his or her moral stance. Science has nothing to offer that would even remotely constitute persuasive evidence that would compel us to deviate from the historic Christian judgment that full homosexual intimacy, homosexual behavior, is immoral” (Jones & Yarhouse, p.13).

Second, Christians have historically affirmed that God's spoken Word, the Scriptures, are our truthful guide in all matters to which they speak. The general consensus today is that attempts to find ways to read Scripture as permissive toward or accepting of homosexual practice have failed (see the Appendix to this paper for my best summary of this massive literature). Gay-affirming proponents within the Church are increasingly and assertively saying that we simply must acknowledge that the Bible is wrong in this area and move on. This is a step into spiritual disaster, in that it requires that we deny the truthfulness of God's revelation of his will to us, place ourselves in judgment over God's revealed moral will (rather than submitting ourselves to it), and alter fundamentally our understanding of the sexual ethic that has served as the foundation of family life throughout human history. Jesus stated "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him" (John 14:21). Let us demonstrate our love for our Savior and Lord as He challenges us to do.

### **References:**

- Bailey, J. M., Dunne, M. P., & Martin, N. G. (2000) "Genetic and environmental influences on sexual orientation and its correlates in an Australian twin sample," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78 (3), 524-536.
- Bailey, J. M., & Pillard, R. C. (1991) "A genetic study of male sexual orientation," *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 48, 1081-1096.
- Bailey, J. M., & Pillard, R. C., Neale, M. C. & Agyei, Y. (1993) "Heritable factors influence sexual orientation in women," *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 50, 217-223.
- Bearman, P. S., & Brückner, H. (2002) "Opposite-sex twins and adolescent same-sex attraction," *American Journal of Sociology*, 107 (5), 1179-1205
- Cochran, S. (2001) "Emerging issues in research on lesbians and gay men's mental health: Does sexual orientation really matter?" *American Psychologist*, 56 (11), 929-947.
- Jones, S. L., & Yarhouse, M. A. (2000) *Homosexuality: The Use of Scientific Research in the Church's Moral Debate* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press).
- Laumann, E. O., Gagnon, J. H., Michael, R. T., & Michaels, S. (1994) *The Social Organization of Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- Sandfort, T., DeGraaf, R., Bijl, R. V., & Schnabel, P. (2001) "Same-sex behavior and psychiatric disorders: Findings from the Netherlands mental health survey and incidence study (NEMESIS)," *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 58 (Jan), 85-91.
- Spitzer, R. (2003) "Can some gay men and lesbians change their sexual orientation? 200 participants reporting a change from homosexual to heterosexual orientation," *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 32 (Oct), 403-417.

### **Recommendations For Further Study on Homosexuality**

*Brief introductions to this complex issue:*

- J. I. Packer, "Why I walked: Sometimes loving a denomination requires you to fight." *Christianity Today*, Jan/03, pp 46-50
- Stan Jones, "The loving opposition: Speaking the truth in a climate of hate." *Christianity Today*, 7/19/93, pp. 18-25.

*For practical help:*

Mark Yarhouse, *Expanding Alternatives to Same-Sex Attraction and Behavior* (available from Yarhouse at the Institute for the Study of Sexual Identity, Psychology, Regent University, Virginia Beach, VA 23464)

Mark A. Yarhouse & Erica S. N. Tan (2004), *Sexual Identity Synthesis: Attributions, Meaning-Making, and the Search for Congruence* (Lanham, MA: University Press of America).

See the Exodus International website <http://www.exodus.to> for current resources.

Robert Davies and Lori Rentzel, *Coming Out of Homosexuality* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993).

Mario Bergner, *Setting Love in Order* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995)

**CCCU Resources: At [www.cccu.org/resourcecenter](http://www.cccu.org/resourcecenter) click Administrator Resources>>Council Initiatives>> Intercultural Competencies>> Human Sexuality>> “Report: Ad Hoc Committee on Human Sexuality**

*Theological and other resources:*

Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001). (scholarly; **core resource**)

Robert A. J. Gagnon, “The Bible and homosexual practice: Theology, analogies, and genes.” *Theology Matters*, 7 (6), Nov/Dec, 2001, pp. 1-13. (at <http://theologymatters.com/BackIssues.html>; click Back Issues, Nov/Dec 01)

See other Gagnon resources at <http://www.robgagnon.net/>

Stanton Jones and Mark Yarhouse, *Homosexuality: The Use of Scientific Research in the Church’s Moral Debate* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000). (*on science and homosexuality; written for intelligent laypeople*)

Dan O. Via and Robert Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views*. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

Thomas E. Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow? Compassion and Clarity in the Homosexuality Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993).

Stanley Grenz, *Welcoming But Not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1998) (*written for intelligent laypeople*)

Author Information:

Stanton L. Jones, Ph.D.

Provost and Professor of Psychology

Wheaton College

501 E. College Avenue

Wheaton, IL 60187

[stanton.jones@wheaton.edu](mailto:stanton.jones@wheaton.edu)

Phone: 630-752-5004

## APPENDIX

### Major Biblical/Theological Arguments AGAINST the Traditional Teaching (and Responses):

**1. The Argument: The Bible's condemnation of homosexual behavior is irrelevant today, because the types of homosexual behavior the biblical authors had in view—cultic temple homosexual intercourse, Greek pederasty, and transvestic homosexual prostitution (the “soft ones” (literal) or male prostitutes of I Cor 6:9)—are not relevant to today's “constitutional” homosexually-oriented, consensual, monogamous adults.**

**Response:** This assertion is simply false. The ancient world, especially Paul's Roman world, knew of stable, preferential homosexual orientation, even attributing it to in-born constitutional conditions (precursors of today's biological theories?). See Mark Smith, “Ancient bisexuality and the interpretation of Romans 1:26-27,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 64 (Summer, 1996), pp. 223-256. and Gagnon, Robert A. J. *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001).

**2.\* The Argument: There are parallel cases where the Church has in the past rejected, but now in the contemporary situation is tolerant of or inclusive of, Gentiles and divorced people. This same acceptance *must* be extended to homosexual persons. (And in reverse, the Church's past acceptance of, but now the contemporary rejection of, slavery and racial prejudice argues the same).**

\* see Gagnon, Robert A. J. “The Bible and homosexual practice: Theology, analogies, and genes.”

**OVERALL response: For each of these, the Bible presents a complex, complicated picture, but in contrast the scriptural condemnation of homosexual behavior is pervasive, absolute, and severe.**

#### **A. Gentile Inclusion:**

1. Gentile *categorization* is based on ancestry, which is 100% unchangeable, whereas biblical categorization of our topic is on homosexual *behavior*, which is voluntary (though homosexual orientation may not be (usually is not) voluntary).
2. The rejection of Gentiles as part of the Covenant people was never absolute, but could be changed by joining the Covenant people (e.g., Exodus 12:48-49, Isaiah 56:6-8). The blessing of the Gentiles through the people of Israel was in fact explicit from the beginning (Genesis 12:3, 22:18).
3. The NT expands and eases the acceptance of Gentiles into the Covenant people, and does so while emphasizing the moral demands of membership among these people: (Acts 15:13-21).

#### **B. Slavery:**

1. Slavery is not a human institution that is part of the Creation order; heterosexual marriage is basic to the created order and a blessed gift. Scripture expresses a commitment to protect and preserve marriage and sexual union; it merely allows and constrains slavery.

2. Slavery is never commended or advised, but regulated and constrained and humanized. Permission is granted to hold slaves (Lev 25:44-46), but standards compassionate for their day are established for conduct toward slaves (Exodus 21:20-26; Deut 23:15-16). “In relation to the cultures of their day, the biblical stance on slavery pushed in the direction of its curtailment and eradication . . .” (Gagnon).
3. In the NT, we see an explicit move against slavery (I Cor 7:21; Philemon).

**C. Divorce and Remarriage:**

1. The scriptural witness is complex on divorce: Divorce is condemned as contrary to God’s will (Malachi 2:16, Matt 19) but allowed and regulated/limited (seemingly grudgingly; Matt 19, I Cor 7:11-16).
2. Jesus said divorce was allowed as a concession to the hardness of heart of people (Matthew 19:8). Careful reading of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 reveals this was not given as a command or blessing, but as a restraint of the evil flowing from divorce; God was regulating and restraining abuse of marriage and of female victims much like he was restraining the evil of slavery by regulating it.
3. Divorce is acknowledged commonly as a sinful life course that can be repented of and eventually redeemed, and/or as a tragedy that overtakes people; it is never properly celebrated as God’s gift.

**3. The Argument: The Higher Ethical Principles of Love and Justice require full acceptance of homosexual persons; these principles “trump” the minutia of specific commands.**

As stated, this seems compelling, but the key is to unpack and critique each assumption. Assumptions:

a) *“Homosexual persons” is a legitimate class based on sexual orientation.*

**Response:** If classes of persons can be defined this way, what about those oriented toward pedophilia, or sexual violence? Are “homosexuals” a “class” like females, or one like adulterers, categorized by a pattern of sinful behavior?

b) *The specific commands of scripture are at variance with these broad principles.*

**Response:** If the principles of Justice and Love are absolute (they are!), then how could God have affirmed these eternal principles and then spoken specific commands to His people that conflicted with them?

c) *Love and Justice are not concepts that are defined within scripture itself.*

**Response:** Love and Justice can become content-less generalities unless informed by scripture itself of what is just and what is loving. Many today, for example, want to define love as tolerant and accepting, but scripture reveals a God whose love is limitless and yet which has sharp edges.

d) *Moral condemnation is inconsistent with love and justice.*

**Response:** If so, then the God of the Bible is neither loving nor just, because He often expresses moral condemnation. Rather, He does so **both** as an expression of His just character (He cannot not condemn what is wrong) and of His loving character (He condemns to redeem and save!).

**Summary: If we aspire to be loving and just as God is loving and just, then we cannot turn our backs on His own expressions and descriptions of how to be loving and just!**

**4. The Argument: “I know homosexual people who claim faith in Christ and exhibit evidence of the Spirit of God in their lives. In the absence of evidence that their sexual behaviors are harming themselves (or others) or detracting from their faith-journey with God, shouldn’t we allow them full fellowship and at least remain agnostic?”**

This reduces logically to two arguments that are both false:

a) *Argument:* Behavior is moral if there is evidence of the Spirit in other areas of life.

**Response:** Note that Paul condemns this sort of reasoning in his confrontations with the Corinthians who felt that their manifestation of the miraculous gifts of the Spirit exempted them from the moral demands of God’s will.

b) *Argument:* Behavior cannot be immoral without evidence of harm. **Response:** While immoral behavior may have negative consequences on average, it almost never has such consequences always (note the recent furor over the evidence that adult-child sex is not always “harmful;” parallel to cigarette smoking.)