

A Lesson From Paul: Same-Sex Attraction May Be A Thorn In The Flesh

By Douglas A. Abbott, Ph.D. *

I have studied the etiology of homosexuality for several years. The impetus for that work began when I was researching adolescent sexual decision-making. I was interested in identifying factors (personal, familial, and social) that explained why some teens choose sexual abstinence while others did not. As I interviewed these young people I was struck by the fact that a few teens were confused and anxious about their sexual orientation. I wasn't surprised, but it now became a real thing to me--a condition I didn't understand. So in 2003 I started my investigation into same-sex attraction.

First, I had to confront my biases. As a Christian, I've always thought same-sex behavior was wrong. Homosexuality frustrates God's design for our existence: Living and loving in families of a type where new life can be created. Second, as a developmental psychologist and a parent myself, it seemed to me that children develop best in the loving care of both a father and a mother. So I began with two biases. But biases are unavoidable, and are not necessarily bad—we all have biases (i.e., fundamental assumptions, or worldviews). A person's worldview influences his search for truth, but it should not completely prejudice the investigation.

Given my background, there were two places I could look for information, facts, theories, and explanations regarding same-sex attraction -- (1) science, and (2) religion. I could have confined myself to the secular, scientific realm, but because I consider sexual behavior as within the realm of morality, I also looked into religious scriptures and writings. Religion can deal with morality, but science cannot. (One can certainly criticize such an approach, but that debate is beyond the scope of this essay.)

From a scientific viewpoint, I found that several things may contribute to a homosexual outcome, including sexual abuse, a parent-child disconnect (i.e., an attachment deficit), and intensive exposure to erotic and pornographic media. There is also evidence that for some, there is some genetic or biological influence. After reading nearly 300 research articles, essays, and books, I concluded that there are environmental factors that interact--in complex ways--with genetic predispositions that can produce same-sex attraction. (See Figure 1.)

This conclusion was nothing new. It's the middle-of-the-road perspective taken by many in the academic community and in the general public. But I was still restless and troubled; I felt something was lacking, like a puzzle missing a part. What else could explain a strong, persistent, erotic attraction to same-sex individuals? Put another way, how could I account for a 16-year-old boy who recently decides he is gay, yet he has no history of early cross-gender behavior, no obvious abuse or neglect, he has two evidently loving parents, he did not engage in early sexual experimentation, and he wasn't involved with pornography?

Of course, there could be family or peer dynamics at work that I wasn't aware of, or didn't understand, that had led this boy to eroticize his own sex. There is much that we still don't know about the childhood foundation of same-sex attractions. Perhaps the true origins of this boy's homosexuality would always remain a mystery.

Yet, I prayed for still further insight and understanding. As I was studying the end of the New Testament, I read about Paul, the early Christian missionary. He traveled and preached extensively from Palestine to Greece between 50 – 65 AD (or CE if you prefer). In Paul's second epistle to the believers in Corinth, Greece (circa 57 AD) he made a surprising revelation:

“*There was given me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me*”¹. This “thorn” has always puzzled me, but I think Paul was saying this:

“I could become arrogant and proud because of all my accomplishments. I might even believe I can save myself by my good works and many years of service to God. But God has given me a weakness that humbles me, and reminds me of my dependence on Him and the fact that it is by His grace that I am saved, after all I can do.”

Paul’s “thorn” could have been some immoral feeling or sinful inclination that he struggled with for many years. Three times Paul tried to pray it away and asked God to remove the unholy thing. But God declined and said “*My grace is sufficient for thee, and your weakness will make you stronger in the end because you will rely on me, the Lord.*”² Note that Paul’s thorn was not something he acted upon. It was something he felt, and felt strongly, but apparently did not do.

The scriptures never mention Paul’s wife or family, so let’s suppose he struggled with same-sex attraction, and that that was the thorn in his side. I have no idea what it really was, but it works for the sake of illustrating a point.

We, like Paul, have “weaknesses of the flesh.” We experience immoral, illegal, unethical and unhealthy inclinations from time to time. These proclivities can include over-indulgence in eating, drinking, spending, and sexual behaviors. They can include desires to lie, steal, inflict harm, or to have lustful, covetous, or vengeful thoughts. Like Paul, we try hard not to do any of these things. Of course at times we fail, but more often than not we succeed in keeping these baser thoughts and inclinations far from fruition. We are able to do that because we possess moral agency. Moral agency is the ability to choose right over wrong, good over evil, and kindness instead of cruelty. With agency one can choose not to act upon an unethical or immoral impulse.

But you may ask: “Why do we even have these feelings in the first place?”

I have an answer and it might explain at least some cases of homosexuality where biological and environmental causes seem to be lacking. (Of course, causal factors may still be there--even though not, at this time, apparent to us.) From a Christian perspective, the primary purpose of mortal life is a test of will. Will we follow God’s laws and keep his commandments, or will we rebel and choose evil? Evil is any action in opposition to God’s laws. Evil behavior is innately self-destructive and harmful to others. Opposition--a choice between good and evil--is part of God’s plan in almost all aspects of life, otherwise agency could not exist.

If we are free to choose, there must be choices. One of the most important choices for a Christian (or Jew, or Muslim, or Hindu) is to marry, have children, and find joy, peace, and contentment in a long-term, monogamous relationship. In opposition to this plan is the path of sexual immorality: fornication, adultery, pedophilia, and homosexuality.

In some cases of homosexuality there may be no clear antecedents that triggered homoerotic feelings. There is no identifiable cause to the outsider. These homoerotic feelings seemed to have appeared on their own without volition or deliberate action by the individual. No one knows how those feelings got there-- but they are there, and real.

Given my interpretation of God’s plan, same-sex attraction for many individuals may simply be a test, a thorn in the flesh; a specific trial that some have, and others do not. This challenge is not unlike others who are tested with a severe disability, a life of poverty and despair--or with over-eating, or addictions to alcohol, gambling, pornography. Thus, the endless debate over nature vs. nurture (as a cause for homosexuality) may in the end prove unproductive and perhaps even unnecessary. This debate is much like riding a Ferris Wheel at the state fair:

you think you are moving forward, but in reality you are going nowhere except around and around as you struggle for the answers.

But whatever the test, God has promised a way out. Listen again to Paul: *“There is no temptation you will experience that is not common to humanity; but God will not suffer you to be tempted above what you are able to bear; but with temptation He will make a way to escape.”*³ This means that one’s moral agency is never usurped by feelings or inclinations. Homosexual desires may be strong and persistent, but they are never so strong as to deprive anyone of the freedom to choose moral conduct.⁴

After thinking through Paul’s experience I decided to add another factor to my explanation of homosexuality. In Figure 1, it’s Factor #5: “Human Weakness and Susceptibility to Sin.” It’s the test and trial factor. It’s the opposition to premarital chastity and marital fidelity.

(Note: Even Factor #5, however, may not exist independent of other influences. Innate human weakness and susceptibility to sin may be more likely here, given the influences of any of the first four factors. So when faced with a test, a trial, or a “thorn in the flesh” such as homoerotic feelings and desires, the person may already be somewhat spiritually compromised by sexual abuse or same-sex attachment deficit. Like the ancient Israelite strong man Samson, who was made spiritually weaker by the seduction of Delilah, he lost his will and confidence to choose God’s way.)

In my theoretical model there are ten factors. The first four are all mediated by the person’s innate temperament and personality. It’s obvious that some of us are born more susceptible to certain trials or temptations than others. This is where the genetics and biology come into play. I believe that some are more predisposed to same-sex attraction than others, just like some are more susceptible to alcohol abuse.

In Figure 1, Factors #5 – #8 may also influence homosexuality, but they all must be mediated by moral agency. One has some control over these things, and is free to choose.

The last two factors, #9 and #10 are more distal contributors to homosexual behavior, but still important in the larger picture. They influence the society as a whole and make it more possible for people to entertain and experiment with homosexual feelings and behaviors.

Figure 1 may look simple, but the layout is misleading in that all of the factors probably interact with each other in complex and convoluted ways. That situation is difficult to diagram and even harder to explain, so I’ve simplified it for the sake of discussion. What the figure does show, in general, is that some individuals may be more susceptible to environment factors that lead to homosexuality because of their innate physical and personality characteristics. Second, some environmental factors that influence same-sex attraction are subject to one’s moral agency and freedom to choose. Third, if you are a believing Christian, Muslim, Jew, or Hindu you recognize that life is a test of will: one may choose good, or one may choose evil. In the Jewish Torah this condition is stated clearly by God: *“I have set before you this day a blessing and a curse; a blessing if you obey my commandments and a curse if you will not.”*⁵

Now, let me return to the case of the 16-year-old who believes himself to be gay. He’s not completely sure but he believes he is attracted only to men and has no interest in girls. He’s tried to suppress the feelings, and has not acted upon them yet, so he is still celibate. Here is how a Christian parent could respond by talking or writing a letter.⁶

First, I love you and care deeply about your welfare. Nothing you feel or do can change that. Like a coach or trainer I’m on your side, I’m in your corner. I am here to listen and help. I will not criticize or condemn, and I will not force you to do anything.

Second, as you struggle with this challenge—for that is what it is, a test a trial-- I encourage you to think of yourself as a son of God, not as a homosexual. Homosexuality is not a noun that describes a permanent condition; it's an adjective that describes current feelings, fantasies, and desires. It's not who you are; it is what you are feeling. Those feeling may be strong and persistent, and you may think this indicates you were born this way. Friends, teachers, counselors, and those in the media will encourage this view; but they are wrong.

Everyone has challenges; everyone struggles with temptations to do immoral or unethical things. This is part of God's plan. We grow as we exercise our moral agency as we choose good over evil, right over wrong. It is only through the exercise of our moral agency that we develop. You have a choice to make, not a condition to resign yourself to live with!

Let me define a word for you. The word is "sophistry." Sophistry is an argument which seems reasonable and true but is really false and is used to deceive people. It is one of the common sophistries of our day to believe that if you have strong feelings or inclinations toward something, then you must act upon those feelings. Son, do not act upon these feeling of same-sex attraction. Homosexual behavior is a sin.

Homosexuality is innately wrong and harmful. If you engage in this behavior you will feel guilty and depressed. Alone at night you will feel unclean and unhappy. In the morning when you wake, you will have little hope or confidence in your future. Your daily life will be consumed by thoughts of sexual immorality. You will be edgy and nervous and will turn to pornography to ease your tension and emptiness. But none of this will help; it will only provide brief pleasure, some bodily satisfaction. Afterwards, you will feel empty again, and crave your next "fix" of homoerotic stimulation. This behavior will never bring you joy, peace, and true happiness.

If you become deeply involved in a promiscuous gay lifestyle, you will soon lose your strength and willpower to stop. It may drag you down so far you will feel you can't come back. But this too is a lie. The Atonement of Jesus Christ is powerful enough to reach out and cleanse you if you are repentant and willing to give up the sinful behavior. If you persist, it will be very hard to reorient your life toward heterosexual marriage and family life.

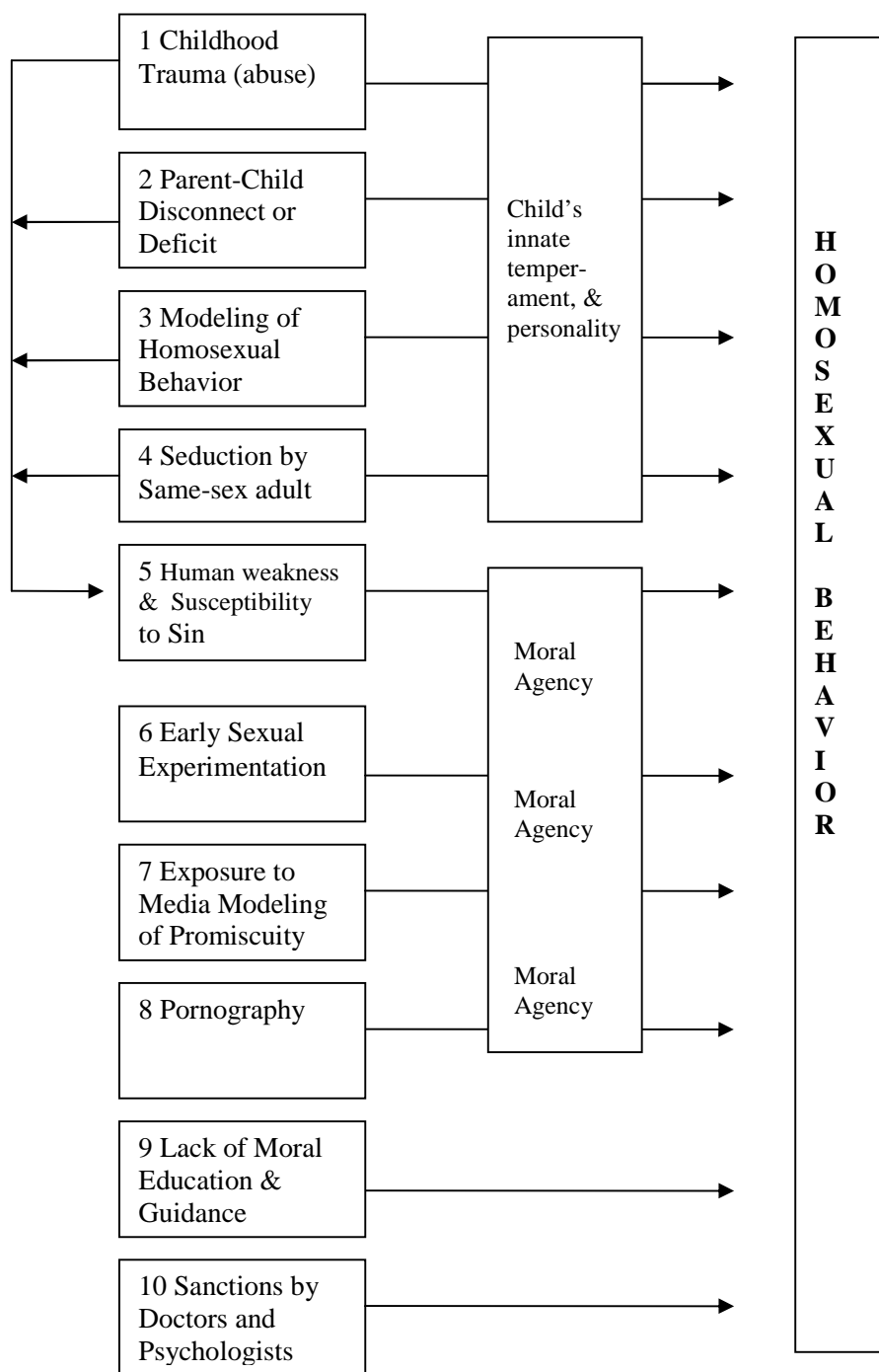
Paul the Apostle said for every temptation there is way of escape. Your way out is to control your feelings and remain celibate. Then get rid of anything that entices you to have homoerotic feelings. That may require you to throw out books, movies, CDs, posters and any sexual paraphernalia. Then I would suggest you get some counseling from a minister or therapist who is willing and able to help you overcome same-sex attraction. My last advice is this: read scriptures, pray, fast occasionally, and attend church often. Seek help from the Savior to resist the temptation and refrain from the behavior.

Don't slide into hopelessness and self-pity and give up. You may believe it is unfair to have such a challenge; a burden is too heavy. If you start to think this way, then look around at others who also struggle with terrible burdens. You know Sarah across the street. She has six little children and her husband was just killed in Iraq. Then there is your uncle Mike who suffers with multiple sclerosis. He cannot even bathe or feed himself. What about your friend Alexis who was sexually abused by her father and still suffers from severe depression? Do you remember Matt Gibbs, a senior at your high school, who was crushed in that car accident last year? He is in a wheelchair permanently. Matt isn't much older than you, and look at his life challenge. Do you think your test is tougher than his?

Son, after all I have said, the choice is still yours. You are free to do what you want, but and you are responsible for the inevitable consequences that will follow. You are also accountable to God for your actions. I hope and pray you will not do this, but the choice is yours. I love you I'm always here for you. --- Dad.

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Figure 1: Ten Factors Involved in Homosexuality (Douglas A. Abbott, 1 Oct. 2007)



Note: This graphic is a simple representation and does not reflect the complexity of interaction between these variables. The timing and intensity of each factor may be different for different individuals. Not all factors need to be present to produce a homosexual outcome.

Bibliography

¹ The New Testament, II Corinthians 12: 7.

² II Corinthians 12:9.

³ I Cor. 10:13.

⁴ Jeffrey R. Holland, Helping Those with Same-Gender Attraction, *The Ensign*, October 2007, pp. 42-45.

⁵ Deuteronomy 11: 26.

⁶Some of the words and phrases I use in this example are borrowed from the talks and essays of Dallin H. Oaks former Utah State Supreme Court Judge and currently a leader in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. See his essay in *The Ensign*, October 1995, pp. 7-14; and also “An Interview with Dallin Oaks and Lance Wickman”, both available online: www.lds.org.