

## Can Homosexuals Change?

By Letha Dawson Scanzoni

You come to the point where you accept your feelings as they are-or you commit suicide. The speaker was a young lesbian mother, who in an effort to change her sexual orientation, had tried everything from prayer to heterosexual marriage. Rejecting suicide because her children needed her, she had begun a journey toward accepting her sexual orientation and having confidence in God's love for her - just as she is.

This woman was one of several committed Christians who were willing to be interviewed when I told them *The Other Side Magazine* has asked me to write an article on gay or lesbian orientation. Outwardly, all had impeccable credentials. They had graduated from some of the finest and best-known evangelical schools and Bible colleges. They had demonstrated important leadership abilities, putting many kinds of gifts and talents into service for Christ in local congregations. They offered radiant Christian testimonies, based on a personal experience of salvation through Jesus Christ. And they all expressed a deep desire to please and serve their Savior.

All are lesbian or gay. They belong to that minority of persons who find themselves romantically attracted, through no conscious decision of their own, to someone of the same sex. Their *orientation* is homosexual.

To speak of a homosexual orientation is to speak of a way of *being and feeling* – whether or not those feelings are ever translated into sexual acts. Some Christians, aware that this orientation is involuntary, feel they can't condemn someone for *being* homosexual. But they're persuaded that God considers any outward expression sinful. Therefore, they call for celibacy for all homosexual Christians. (See, for example, David Atkinson, *Homosexuals in the Christian Fellowship*).

Other equally devoted and sincere Christians believe the spirit of biblical teachings on covenantal relationships could be applied to homosexual persons. This would allow them the option of an honorable way to express their love in a permanent, monogamous union, just as heterosexuals have the institution of marriage. (See for example, John McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual*; James Nelson, *Embodiment*; and Letha Scanzoni and Virginia Ramey Molenkott, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?*).

But that is not what this article is about. Our focus here is on homosexual orientation – its nature and origin. Why? Because I’m convinced that much of our insensitivity to gay men and lesbians stems from a failure to understand orientation. In writing this article, my hope is that many readers of *The Other Side* will be helped to relate with greater understanding and respect to those Christians brothers and sisters who differ from themselves only in the direction of their sexual feelings.

Your sexual orientation is determined by whether you are romantically attracted to people of the same sex or of the opposite sex. If your romantic feelings and sexual fantasies are for people of the opposite sex, your orientation is heterosexual. If they are for people of your own sex, your orientation is homosexual.

I’m speaking here about basic, underlying *feelings* – not genital acts. Persons with homosexual *feelings* may or may not act upon those feelings during their lifetime; they may or may not express those feelings genitally – just as persons with heterosexual feelings may or may not express their feelings genitally over the course of a lifetime.

Homosexual feelings can be loving or lustful, just as heterosexual feelings can be. Homosexual persons may be celibate or sexually active, just as heterosexual persons may be. Homosexual relationships may be either committed or casual, caring or exploitative, exclusive or promiscuous,

responsible or irresponsible – again, just as heterosexual relationships can be. And, like heterosexual persons, homosexual persons may have many *nonsexual* friendships-both with persons of the same sex and with persons of the opposite sex.

In other words, homosexual persons are just like heterosexual persons – except that the gender of the object of romantic interest differs.

The reason a small minority of persons is characterized by a homosexual orientation isn't known with any certainty.

Years ago, most research on the topic was based on small clinical samples.

Psychologists and psychiatrists would report case studies describing troubled persons who came to them in great turmoil over their homosexuality. Aware of societal condemnation, these homosexual persons often wanted to be rid of their sexual orientation. They accepted the labels attached to them: “sick,” “immature,” “sinful,” “immoral,” “perverted,” “criminal.” Their therapists searched for root causes of their homosexual condition and developed theories about dominant, overbearing mothers and weak, absent fathers.

Sometimes the theories emphasized bad experiences with people of the opposite sex- or childhood seductions by adults of the same sex. In any case, these homosexual men and women who came for help were assumed to be representative of homosexual persons in general.

Today, research based on larger, more representative samples yields a different result. And most of the earlier notions about homosexual development no longer hold up. The older clinical data overlooked the vast number of homosexual persons who were quietly going about their lives, just as most heterosexual persons do. Within this largely hidden segment of the gay and lesbian population were women and men working

successfully in a wide variety of occupations and professions. Some were holding leadership positions in religious organizations, educational enterprises, the arts, science, medical care, and government service. Such persons weren't included in the earlier clinical studies because they weren't troubled by self-disdain and weren't seeking help for feelings and attractions that they had learned to accept as part of themselves.

On the basis of ongoing, contemporary, large-scale research, behavioral scientists still have many questions about how human sexuality in general develops. But when it comes to homosexual orientation, the prevailing opinion is that its development *cannot* be traced to something the parents did or didn't do – nor to any of the older presumed causes. Rather a complex interaction of factors – both biological and environmental – is apparently involved. In fact, many scholars are convinced that a predisposition toward homosexuality exists in some persons before birth. Increasingly, many are persuaded that, whatever its origin, homosexual orientation is in itself involuntary.

Among those investigating such questions are Alan Bell, Martin Weinberg, and Sue Kiefer Hammersmith, who are associated with Indiana University's Alfred Kinsey Institute for Sex Research. They report that “by the time boys and girls reach adolescence, their sexual preference is likely to be already determined, even though they may not yet have become sexually active” (*Sexual Preference*, p.186).

Data from their scientifically sophisticated study indicate that “childhood and adolescent homosexuality, especially pronounced homosexual feelings, cannot be regarded as just a passing fancy that every child goes through at one time or another. Rather in most cases, this inclination seems to be relatively enduring and so deeply rooted that it is likely to continue as a lasting homosexual orientation in adult life” (*Sexual Preference*, p. 186).

These social scientists repeatedly underscore one main point: homosexual *feelings* “appear to play a more important role than do homosexual behaviors in the development of a homosexual orientation” (*Sexual Preference*, p.188). That is, the firmly rooted preference for same-sex romantic attachments tends to precede rather than follow any homosexual behavior.

If we are going to reach out in Christian love to homosexual women and men, we cannot ignore such findings. A person’s feelings are part of that person’s core being. It is unspeakably cruel to dismiss such feelings lightly or to run roughshod over them. “I had always heard that homosexual feelings were evil,” said one gay Christian. “But then, when I would think about my feelings for the person I love so much, I couldn’t understand how such deep love could be bad.”

Most gay and lesbian Christians I’ve talked with were aware of the homosexual feelings at an early age. One person, as a teenager, had prayed regularly for God’s safekeeping of whoever would someday be that person’s life partner - anticipating that this future partner would be someone of the same sex. A lesbian Christian tells of make-believe play with paper dolls during childhood in which she would create a pretend family consisting of two adult women and a baby or small child. A gay male in his thirties tells of trying to fight his homosexual feelings all during puberty, then joining a religious order to train himself for the priesthood, hoping to cope with his feelings there. After years of psychoanalysis, he eventually decided to accept himself as he is.

Almost invariably, Christian lesbians and gay men report sincere, intense, and repeated efforts to change their sexual orientation. “I went forward at every revival service or healing service I could find, always hoping for deliverance,” say many homosexual people I’ve talked with, recalling their adolescence and young-adult years.

“I remember especially those times in prayer meetings when someone would ask if there were any ‘unspoken requests,’ ” one lesbian reminisced. “I always had a request I didn’t *dare* speak out loud; so I’d hold up my hand to request prayer for that.” A gay male in his twenties thought back on his feelings during puberty: “I really believed God would change me. I prayed and prayed about it. But God didn’t change me. That didn’t please me, but in time I came to accept it and now believe God accepts me as I am.”

“I couldn’t understand why, if a homosexual orientation is so bad, God didn’t answer my constant prayers to change,” said another homosexual Christian. “It didn’t make sense to me. Why wouldn’t God just take away my homosexual feelings?” (A woman devoted to a ministry among gay people asks, “Could it be that God isn’t interested in ‘healing’ people that God doesn’t consider sick?”)

Some homosexuals told me of desperate attempts to convince themselves that they had been changed. “Because I wasn’t involved in a homosexual relationship, I guess I thought that God had indeed changed me and that my homosexual feelings were gone,” one woman remembered. “I told a young man about it, because he too was seeking a ‘cure.’ He had been expelled from a Christian college because of his homosexuality, and my heart ached for him. So I tried to share my experience. He was one of the most devoted Christians I had ever known, but he kept asking me if I thought God still loved him. I felt devastated as I watched his pain in being told by other Christians that he couldn’t be romantically attracted to people of the same sex, as he was.” She paused and wondered where her former classmate is today, whether he has been driven away from the Christianity he felt had no room for him, whether he’s even alive. (A number of homosexual Christians have seen people they knew commit

suicide after efforts and prayers for change in orientation apparently went unanswered.)

In a paper presented at the 1982 convention of the Christian Association for Psychological Studies, Phyllis Hart addressed some ethical issues in counseling homosexual persons. As an evangelical psychotherapist and former seminary professor, she expressed concern over the unrelenting pressure put on homosexual persons to change how they feel. Such pressures, she suggested, have a “lethal – or nearly lethal-effect on sensitive, deeply spiritual gay Christians who have spent the better part of their lives trying to be heterosexual, in a vain attempt to become something they could not.” Such Christians, she said, are often “shells of the people they could have become if they would have accepted their gay orientation years before.”

Hart added that seeing the anguish of this group has done more to make her radical than anything else. “Because they have so much to lose by coming out into the open, many famous Christian gay people follow threads of so-called cures,” she explained, “much as cancer victims go from one faith-healer to another.”

Not surprisingly, some gay Christians are questioning investing so much energy in pretending that they are something they are not - or trying to change into something they never can be. They wonder if it might not be better to accept their homosexual orientation as it is and use their energies instead to serve Christ and the church and humankind. This does not necessarily mean a public declaration of their sexual orientation. But it does mean a sense of quiet self-acceptance before God.

“It’s impossible to convey the freedom I felt on admitting my orientation to God,” one gay person told me. “I had tried talking with ministers and therapists, attending deliverance services, and all the rest. But I came to

the point that I would take the matter up solely with God, and I knew this was the way to peace at last.”

“It’s true that some Christians insist that homosexuals *can* change how they feel-indeed that they should change.

But other Christians have begun questioning that notion - and not just capriciously but after careful scriptural, theological, historical, and scientific study.

Some of these Christians are convinced that while certain same-sex acts are condemned in Scripture (just as are many heterosexual acts), the question of homosexual *orientation* as now understood by behavioral scientists is not addressed directly at all. And the avoiding certain behaviors does not in itself change the basic orientation of an exclusively homosexual individual.

Bell, Weinberg, and Hammersmith - the researchers I referred to earlier-write that although their book was entitled *Sexual Preference*, they didn’t mean to imply “that a given sexual orientation is the result of a conscious decision or is as changeable as the many moment-by-moment decisions we make in our lives.”

Neither homosexuals nor heterosexuals are what they are “by design,” say these authors. It’s no easier for homosexual men and women to reverse their sexual orientation than it is for heterosexuals to become predominantly or exclusively homosexual in both their feelings and actions. (*Sexual Preference*, p.222).

But what about the Masters and Johnson study, you may be asking. Didn’t that show that homosexuals persons can convert or revert to heterosexuality?

It's true that their book *Homosexuality in Perspective*, sex researchers William Masters and Virginia Johnson tell of homosexually *experienced* men and women who were helped to *function* heterosexually. That is, some people who had participated in homosexual behavior were able, through therapy, to engage in certain heterosexual acts. The key words are *experienced* and *function*. The emphasis is on behavior (which may in some instances be changed), not on orientation (which is deeply ingrained and resistant to change). So the findings are hardly startling.

But perhaps a few more comments to be made about Masters and Johnson research. In the past, certain Christians decried such studies. They roundly criticized those of us who suggested that behavioral science research could contribute to theological understanding. Yet now many of these same Christians have seized upon *this* study almost with glee.

First, although Masters and Johnson used what is known as the Kinsey scale to measure the degree of homosexuality of their subjects, they failed to use it in the way the original researchers at the Kinsey Institute intended. Masters and Johnson classified persons as homosexual on the basis of overt sexual experience alone (*Homosexuality in Perspective*, p.8-9).

The Kinsey researchers had emphasized that both sexual experience *and* psychic responses (including fantasies, dreams, and erotic arousal) must be taken into account; only then can it be ascertained where a person falls on a continuum between exclusive heterosexuality and exclusive homosexuality. (For more information on this flaw in the Masters and Johnson research, see the critique by Wardell Pomeroy, one of the original Kinsey researchers, in the September 1979 issue of *SEICUS Report*.)

Second, Masters and Johnson were by no means making moral judgments on homosexuality and insisting that all homosexual persons can or should

change. Their book describes many years of research and two kinds of investigations that focused on persons whose personal histories included homosexual experience, whether limited or extensive. The investigations involved both laboratory observation (comparing heterosexually married couples and committed homosexual couples) and clinical studies.

But it was their report on the *clinical investigation* which got most of the attention. Here in the second half of their book, Masters and Johnson tell of persons who wanted some sort of help with their homosexuality. They had come to the Masters and Johnson Institute in St. Louis for sex therapy, just as heterosexual persons have done for many years. (People have sought sexual help from the Masters and Johnson Institute since their pioneering laboratory studies were published in a book entitled *Human Sexual Response* and since a description of how they applied their clinical findings was published in a second book entitled *Human Sexual Inadequacy*.)

Two categories of homosexual persons sought help: the *homosexually “dysfunctional”* and the *homosexually “dissatisfied.”* People in the first group wanted help because of some sexual problem, such as inability to achieve orgasm, but wanted to continue in their homosexual relationships. People in the second group wanted to function heterosexually. Although people in this second group had had some homosexual experiences, many were already involved in heterosexual marriages or otherwise interested in and involved with an opposite-sex partner.

Masters and Johnson wanted to help homosexual persons in distress, not to add to their distress by implying that all homosexual persons must somehow stop being homosexual!

They were well aware of the difficulty of such change, even in highly motivated persons who were deeply dissatisfied with living and relating

as homosexuals. “Therapy for sexual dissatisfaction represents the ‘disaster area’ in the institute’s treatment program for sexually distressed homosexuals,” they write. Their therapy program failed for one out of three in the “dissatisfied” category as compared with a failure rate of only one out of ten in the “dysfunctional” category (*Homosexuality in Perspective*, p.407).

They also reported that homosexuals who wanted “to become sexually effective as homosexuals were far more cooperative with the therapy program than those homosexuals requesting conversion or reversion to heterosexuality” (*Homosexuality in Perspective*, p.247).

Wardell Pomeroy, in his critique of the Masters and Johnson study, faults the emphasis on changed *sexual behavior* and the ignoring of *psychic response*.

“My guess is that conflict over fantasy and erotic arousal accounts for much of the ‘dissatisfied’ group’s lack of cooperation both during treatment and follow up,” he writes, referring to those who sought behavioral change.

In another critique, Bell, Weinberg, and Hammersmith draw attention to the high percentage of persons in the Masters and Johnson group that were married to a heterosexual spouse, presumably indicating bisexual capabilities rather than exclusive homosexuality. Their own experience has shown that, among bisexuals, a “homosexual preference” apparently emerges later and is more tied to social experiences.

Thus, bisexuals “are probably more susceptible to having their sexual responses altered” since a certain degree of heterosexual interest, response, and possibly experience is already there. On the other hand, these authors found that “exclusive homosexuality seemed to be something that was firmly established by the end of the adolescence and

relatively impervious to change or modification by outside influences” (*Sexual Preference*, pp.211, 217).

Sexual orientation is a complex set of feelings that are part of a person’s core being, directing his or her yearnings for romantic and erotic expression and bonding. In light of that, its understandable why so many “ex-gay” ministries have run into difficulties, with many folding. Through Christian counseling, certain behaviors may change, and certain lifestyles (like promiscuity and cruising) may be rejected as incompatible with Christian discipleship. But none of that changes sexual orientation.

“It’s like telling me I can’t have green eyes,” one lesbian Christian says after years of struggling toward self-acceptance. “The color of my eyes is simply a natural part of me. Oh, I could cover them up for a while, wear blue or brown contacts, but that wouldn’t change the reality. My eyes *are* green and my sexual orientation *is* gay.”

Many “EX-GAY” ministries using Christian terminology, have said they are able to convert a person from a homosexual to heterosexual orientation. Most of their heralded victories, however, turn out to be behavioral rather than orientational. Adherents, even those who have given up overt homosexual practice, still find themselves romantically attracted to people of the same sex. The inner sexual longing remains.

Even some of the founders and leaders of these ministries have gradually come to realize that their own homosexual orientation has *not* disappeared. This recognition of an ongoing homosexual orientation is very painful, for it comes, in some cases, after the individuals involved have given sincere, glowing public testimonies about how God has “cured” their homosexuality. (Some who have made such statements now admit their testimonies were given “in faith,” believing that in time God would remove their homosexual desires.)

Other homosexual Christians, including some who are sometimes referred to as “ex-gay,” are different. Although they have accepted their homosexual orientation as a given, they have chosen not to act upon it. In honesty, they admit they are not really ex-gays but rather *celibate* gays, believing they can better honor and serve God in this way.

Similarly, some who are aware of bisexual impulses have chosen not to foster their homosexual desires; at the same time they have encouraged and strengthened their heterosexual interests-particularly in cases where they are married to someone of the opposite sex. Such persons have resolved to be faithful to the spouse and share their struggles with the spouse so that the two can work together on any problems that arise. Sometimes these persons, too, may speak of themselves as “changed,” since they may have left a way of life where their homosexuality was expressed. And, in this sense, they may *have* lowered their numerical rating on the Kinsey scale.

However, in saying this, caution is called for. Heterosexual marriage does not “cure” or “change” the homosexual orientation and should never be entered with that hope in mind. Young gay men have told me of young heterosexual women who are confident that their love can change the men, making it almost their mission in life to try. And both homosexual men and women have told me of tragic marriages which they entered in order to change their sexual orientation or to cover it up, hoping to show others they were “OK - like everybody else.” Sometimes they wanted to convince *themselves*, too, that they weren’t gay.

“I don’t know anyone who was changed by getting married,” one person said. “But I know of an awful lot of divorces that took place because gay persons got married and then *couldn’t* change.” Such incidents are tragic both for the heterosexual spouse and for any children that may have been born to the couple. Several homosexual persons, pained because of the

suffering they have brought on their former spouse and children as well as themselves, have voiced the wish that they had never married in the first place. “But what can you do,” some have said, “with all the pressures of the church and society pushing you into it, hoping it will change you?”

Isn't it time for Christians to acknowledge more honestly the deep-rooted nature of homosexual orientation? Rather than letting differences in sexual orientation divide us, heterosexual and homosexual Christians can reach out to one another in the body of Christ. We need one another in our common struggle to follow God with integrity and authenticity in whatever context God has placed us.

Meeting homosexual Christians may challenge our preconceptions of what salvation does and what homosexual persons are like. Some of us have thought that becoming “a new creation in Christ” meant that someone who was homosexual would be changed into a heterosexual by the act of accepting Christ. Learning about homosexual *orientation* throws a different light on the matter. Perhaps it would be better to think in terms of “handedness.” Accepting Christ and becoming a new creation in the family of God doesn't change a left-handed person into a right-handed person, but a genuine salvation experience should certainly cause a person to want to use that favored hand, whether left or right, to do good and not evil.

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