

CONVERSION THERAPY

Down the ages and across the world, same-sex attraction and practice have been deemed unnatural. Our physiologies tell us that, our consciences also, and the irrefutable fact that our race requires heterosexuality for its existence. Accordingly, the Bible unpacks what we know but suppress (Rom. 1:18-32), namely, that the gift of sex has been divinely given us for within the covenantal commitment of monogamous marriage, and that homosexuality is thus a sinful breach of God's created order. It flourishes only in societies bent on sin and divinely given over to it.

THE PRACTICES

This general awareness of how unnatural are sexual aberrations explains why it was the medical profession and not the Christian church that introduced conversion therapy:

- In 1899, German psychiatrist Albert von Schrenck-Notzing (1862–1929) claimed he had reversed his client's homosexuality by 45 sessions of hypnosis and a visit to a brothel. 
- Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) hypothesized psychologically that humans are born innately bisexual but that men become homosexuals due to conditioning. He thus denied that homosexuality is a disease, yet some of his colleagues disagreed, introducing new psychiatric interventions to "cure" the gay. 
- Austrian endocrinologist Eugen Steinach (1861–1944) viewed homosexuality in physical terms, beginning in the testicles. This resulted in the 1920s in castrations and the curious substitution of "heterosexual" testicles. 
- Other treatments included electroconvulsive therapy and extreme techniques such as lobotomies, and electrodes implanted directly into the brain. Pioneer of the technique, American psychiatrist Robert Galbraith Heath (1915–99), used brain stimulation, hired prostitutes, and utilized heterosexual pornography, to "change" the sexual orientation of gay men. Heath claimed success but his work is challenged and criticized on methodological grounds. 
- Then came "aversion therapy," based on the premise that

disgust for homosexuality kills same-sex desire. Under medical supervision, gay men were given chemicals to make them vomit when looking at photos of their lovers. Others received electric shocks—sometimes to their genitals—to mar their taste for gay pornography or cross-dressing.

THE PUSHBACK

Understandably, we witness today a rejection of conversion and aversion therapies. The sea change became visible by 1973 when the American Psychological Association removed homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, and when medical professionals began to distance themselves from historic techniques. A number of reasons account for this.

First, the means didn't reflect the end. The end was well intentioned—freedom from sexual bondage—but the means, especially when imposed, ranged from the humiliating to the barbaric. Without consensus in understanding homosexuality, the medical profession effectively experimented on gay men. It is, then, surely hypocrisy to oppose such experimentation while defending barbaric gender-manipulating surgeries.

Second, the therapy had both mixed and limited results. They were chiefly exterior (restraining conduct) and did not root out the fundamental cause of the orientation, namely a depraved heart. Thus, doctors of various disciplines rightly regarded homosexuality as a physical, psychiatric, or psychological disease, omitting from consideration the law of God and the spiritual make-up of man. Amid the increasing hubris of their intellectual disciplines they presumed that homosexuality could be healed by human means.

Third, science (the study of observable data) has increasingly morphed into the religion of Scientism (the injection of God-less presuppositions into the reading of data). When, then, it is said that the medical establishment now concurs that homosexuality is not a matter of choice, we are obliged to inquire as to whether science or Scientism speaking. Christians esteem science as God's call to study the observable universe, but we refuse to kowtow to Scientism. Its atheistic agenda is precisely what precludes us from throwing out the need of conversion along with the therapy.



CONVERSION HOSTILITY

Ironically, while the healthcare professionals were making their U-turn, faith-based groups began emerging with their forms of “conversion” (aka “reparative”) therapy. Sometimes advertising themselves as “ex-gay” ministries, their methods varied from talk therapy to exorcisms. At “gay conversion” camps and conferences, LGBTQ people were said to have been isolated from family and friends, hypnotized, told to pray until their homosexuality subsided, instructed to beat effigies of their parents, coached on “proper” gender roles, and were told their sexuality was unnatural and sinful. (<https://pixabay.com/vectors/>)

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

As recipients of God’s grace, Christians own the fact that only our Savior is perfect and does all things perfectly. It is important for us, then, to humbly acknowledge that we are not always at our best in knowing and applying the Scriptures to issues as they arise. Through study, prayer, and experience our responses mature over time. This means that we sometimes have to seek forgiveness for early responses lacking mature reflection and wise application.

Moreover, we point out that not everything done in the name of Christ is Christian. The Christian church is beset as much by those purporting to be her friends as by her enemies. Such “friends” fall into two categories.

First, there are the charlatans who infiltrate the church. They can be discerned by their lust for power. Christians are irked but unsurprised by them, for the Bible gives us examples of them. One such charlatan was Simon Magus, a former magician, who offered the apostles money to gain their power. He was swiftly rebuked by Peter and called to repentance (Acts 8:9-24). Charlatan therapists and exorcists are likewise motivated and need the same rebuttal. They mar the case for faith and damage those despairing over their sin.

Second, there are the sincere, who, by contrast, are genuinely interested in the welfare of the troubled, but their conversion or reparative theories are misconceived. When the end becomes freedom from sexual aberration rather than the knowledge of God through Christ, such therapies, by-passing the power of the gospel, become a form of moralism. They substitute personal reform for repentance, and while they may achieve a measure of behavioral change, reform of personal conduct is no substitute for the new nature on offer through Jesus Christ. Whereas such therapies are humanly guided, the gospel is powered by the Holy Spirit. As we shall see, people cannot change thoroughly, lastingly, and to God’s glory without coming into possession of a new nature.

[Pp. 1–2 have used Erin Blakemore’s History article, “Gay Conversion Therapy’s Disturbing 19th-Century Origins” (www.history.com/articles/gay-conversion-therapy-origins-19th-century).]

A CHRISTIAN REFUSAL

While the Christian church acknowledges that not all done in her name has been biblically and theologically orthodox or pastorally sensitive, we have no warrant to capitulate to socio-progressivism. We dare not jettison the biblical doctrine of conversion on account of isolated but well-publicized charlatans and misguided therapists.

First, because far greater damage would be done by the church’s silence on the universal need for conversion than by her uncritical promotion of conversion therapies. The therapies used in the name of the church, while sometimes questionable, are temporal and largely talk-based, and are not the barbaric medical experiments of the past. Indeed, they are nothing compared to the grotesque gender-manipulating surgeries supported by the LGBTQ community, even on minors. By contrast, the Christian call for conversions has the potential for eternal blessing and is to be made loud and clear.

Second, we refuse to capitulate because it is Christ and not the LGBTQ community who is Lord of our conscience. Ultimately, what the LGBTQ community wants is not an end to therapy but peace for their troubled consciences. Thus, activists, utterly misguided, will keep on promoting Pride until all concede that sexual aberrancy is natural and sinless. This pursuit of zero resistance is futile for even supposing they succeed in halting all opposition, they cannot mute the voice of God speaking through their consciences.

Third, capitulation is superfluous for what ultimately causes the LGBTQ community pain and shame is not the therapy but the sin. The therapy is an easy self-deflecting target, yet until members of the community see their sins as God sees them (as we all must), they will continue to blame advocates of conversion and aversion therapies for their woes. This is regrettable, for God’s uses pain and shame to call us back to himself. The gay community would, then, be better off interpreting their emotions as God’s gracious enticement to find pardon and peace in Jesus Christ.

Fourth, we refuse to capitulate because homosexuals and lesbians are willingly converting to Christ (Psalm 110:3 [KJV]). They are entering into the freedom Jesus promised (John 8:32), and are being transformed over the course of their lives. Indeed, biblical and spiritual conversion comes with no experimentation, no coercion, and no regrets! On paper, you would think that this would be an offer to attract the LGBTQ community. Not so, for the entire *raison d’être* of Pride is the self-gratifying love of sin. Thus, whereas every conversion is a mercy to the saved, it pronounces a guilty verdict on the lies the gay community both accepts and disseminates.



CONVERSION REALITY

The conversion of which the Bible speaks is of a much superior order than that which therapies offer. Biblical conversion speaks of a transformation that is definitive and not just hopeful; that encompasses our entire nature and not just our bondage to a particular sin; that is free to the recipient and not costly; and that has eternal and not just temporal implications. This conversion is most worthy of our consideration. (www.pixabay.com/vectors.)

THE CONTEXT OF BIBLICAL CONVERSION

God's work in sinners individually is set against the backdrop of what God has done for us historically. By giving his Son unto the death of the cross, God conveys to us several critical truths about converting from sin unto God:

First, that our conversion is indispensable. Simply put, we dare not leave this life without turning unto God from our sins. They are an affront to his law and a marring of his beautiful creation but are seen most gravely in the crucifixion of Christ. We may not claim, then, to "Rest in Peace" or be heavenward bound for so long as we refuse to turn from our sins to God. Conversion does not save us—it is the occasion of our salvation not the cause of it—but it does indicate whether we are resting in Christ for the atonement of our sins. Unless we do so, we are destined to bear ourselves the penalty for our sins. It is in this sense that conversion is indispensable.

Second, that our conversion is possible. God didn't send his Son to the death of the cross so that the benefits of his death may rest latent in the mists of history. Rather, God incessantly points us to Christ's death at Calvary as his offer of pardon for sin, peace with him, release from the clutches of Satan, freedom from the bondage of our sin, and entrance into eternal life. Time, while running out, has not diminished this offer. Cease, then, viewing Christ's cross as but a landmark of history, and return to God.

Third, that our conversion is desirable. Certainly, it is desirable to God. He, as it were, runs to show mercy to the converting, but drags his heels to judge the unconverted. Judgment, Scripture tells us, is his "*strange*" or "*alien*" work (Isaiah 28:21). Yet, as our sins take their toll on us, those benefits of Christ's death that we have so allowed to gather dust, can, under the good hand of God, become most sought after by us. How this happens, we shall see shortly. Suffice it to say here, that many are those who testify that as the despair of sin and its consequences settled upon their souls, so the remembrance of Christ and God's call to be converted broke in upon them as a glorious ray of light shining through the darkest of clouds.

THE CONTENT OF BIBLICAL CONVERSION

This supernatural desire for conversion is due to the power of God's Spirit. He works in conversion in three ways.

First, God the Spirit brings sinners to life. The New Testament refers to this by means of the term *regeneration* and the image of the new birth. They mean the same, for to be re-generated is to be born again. Amid a first-century world as broken as ours, the apostle Paul reminded Titus: "*when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior*" (Titus 3:4-6). In other words, God by his grace, grants undeserving sinners a new life. We become like new babies washed clean of what is past.

This image is unpacked for us by the apostles John and Peter (John 1:12-13; 3:1-8; 1 John 2:28-3:3; 1 Peter 1:3, 23). They teach us that whereas God the Father begets his people, God the Spirit brings them to birth. The reborn look the same yet have a new standing (we are children of God, royal children in effect) and a new nature. Since this is all of God, our conversion begins without us being conscious of it. Only once we are born again do we sense a new desire and ability to turn to God.

Second, God the Spirit grants us repentance. In our new natures we now do the very thing we would or could never do in our first or old natures. The new birth opens us up to what our sins mean to God, meant to Christ, and do to us. We change our mind about our sin (now regarding it as damning and enslaving), we feel its impact (now hating it), and we desire more and more to be righteous and to shun sin.

Third, God the Spirit grants us faith in Christ. Despairing of our sin, and perceiving it to run through our best efforts, we see no other recourse than to fall upon Christ for our pardon and forgiveness. Theologians sometimes discuss which of these conscious elements of our converting come first, repentance or faith. Professor John Murray (1898–1975) said it best: the born again have simultaneously a penitent faith and a believing repentance. In other words, we rest on Christ because we are repentant, yet in repenting we realize that our only recourse is to fall on Christ. Thus, these conscious elements of our conversion are like two strands of a single rope. They are distinguishable yet inseparable.

Myriads down the centuries and across the world have been converted. They have found in conversion that God humbles us, yet contra the therapies, without humiliating us. He brings us down to raise us high in Christ. Many questions remain about this miracle of God's grace and power, yet of uppermost importance is this one: Have you been converted?

Residential Address:

CONVERSION TESTIMONY

Typically, the media ignores those previously gay finding freedom and transformation in Christ. Among the better known are Rosario Butterfield (former tenured professor of English and Women's Studies at Syracuse University) and Becket Cook, a successful designer in Hollywood's fashion industry.

THE CONVERSION OF BECKET COOK

For years, Becket Cook lived the high life, mixing on the international fashion circuit with stars and supermodels from Natalie Portman to Claudia Schiffer. Doing photo shoots for *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*, he attended award shows and parties at the homes of Paris Hilton and Prince, spending summers swimming in the pool of Drew Barrymore, all the while living a gay lifestyle.

At a party in 2009, an overwhelming sense of emptiness afflicted Cook, causing him to ponder whether, for all his success, there was anything more to life. Significantly, he recalls, "I knew God was never an option, because I was gay. It was off the table. I wasn't confused about what the Bible had to say about homosexuality. I knew it was clear. But I was still searching for meaning."

Six months later, in a coffee shop in Los Angeles' Silver Lake Neighborhood, Cook saw some young people engaged in Bible study. Posing them some questions, including whether they believed homosexuality to be sin, they explained to him the good news of Jesus Christ. Instead of exclaiming their insanity and proclaiming them to be from the dark ages, Cook found that he had been readied by his emptiness to reconsider his lifestyle. When, then, they invited him to church, he went the next Sunday. What he heard utterly challenged his view of religion as good people doing good things. The message of God's grace in Christ so met his need that, in prayer to God, he forsook his gay identity for a new one in Christ.

**THE CONVICTIONS OF BECKET COOK**

Since Christ desires disciples and not just converts (Matthew 28:18-20), Cook benefitted from the investment of his pastor and the church family. This took the form of conversations, prayer, books, and sermons. "Every time I'd listen to a sermon or read the Bible I'd end up in tears: 'Oh my gosh, this is true! I can't believe I know God and know the meaning of life finally!'" Cook has since graduated from Talbot School of Theology and written a memoir, *A Change of Affection: A Gay Man's Incredible Story of Redemption*. He shares important observations.

First, Cook testifies that he found Christ to be safe. No longer was he under pressure to keep up his physique and to date, nor did he face from Christ the betrayals of all his ex-boyfriends. Christ, he discovered, expected nothing from him but faithfulness.

Second, Cook lets us in on the inner psychology of the Pride movement. The transformation of gay sex from a sin to a sacrament, with its emblem of the rainbow, its parades, and transferal of responsibility for the pain and shame from the sin to the actions of the therapists, is, he says, all intended to convince that the gay lifestyle is upright.

Third, Cook testifies that the notion of a gay Christian is "wildly misleading." "It's almost like you're stewing in your old sin, hanging onto your old self in a weird way. . . So I flee from that term as far as I can. It's not who I am at all. If people ask me how I identify, I'm just like, 'I don't identify by my sexuality. I'm a follower of Christ who has a lot of struggles, including same-sex attraction.'" God's grace is sufficient for Cook, and it is sufficient for all who likewise convert to God through Christ.

[This page draws from Brett McCracken's 2019 article, "From Gay to Gospel: The Fascinating Story of Becket Cook." Go to www.the-gospelcoalition.org/article/gay-gospel-becket-cook/ to read it all.]

NEXT ISSUE DUE OUT: SEPTEMBER 1