

ORIENTATION, CHOICE, & CHANGE

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Orientation, Choice, and Change

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Does God love us for who we are?

*Does he even acknowledge
who we are?*

Is it possible to change?

Should anyone ever change?

Let's talk about orientation. It's one of the biggest words around these days—and the concepts that go with it make up some of the most important topics everyone is talking about. Like the cover of this booklet says, the idea of orientation is closely connected with issues of personal *choice*, and the possibility of personal *change*.

But even with all the discussion that's going on, have you noticed how little people seem to be really examining the issues? What is orientation? And what should we do with it? Should everyone's orientation be equally affirmed and cultivated? And what if someone wants to change—to live differently than they feel oriented? Is that possible? Is it healthy?

This booklet attempts to provide a fresh starting point for the discussion. It also attempts to add one more element to the discussion (What do the Christian scriptures have to say about all this?), and to ask a few questions (Does the Bible agree with our culture's current idea of orientation? Based on its teachings, what does God say about things like choice and change?). If you're a Christian, these thoughts might help you organize your own thinking and cut through some of the more confusing discussions that are becoming common. If you're not a follower of Christ, I hope you'll sense solid ground under these musings, and be intrigued to explore more deeply into the coherent view of the world that God has provided for us in the Bible.

Let's start with some definition.

ORIENTATION: WHAT IS IT?

Have you ever been in the middle of a conversation, and midway through you realize that you don't actually know what the other person is talking about? Maybe you realize they've been using a word and you've been nodding along, until it occurs to you that they might mean something different than you thought. Or maybe you assumed you both agreed on something, but as they keep talking you start wondering where they came up with their ideas.

"Orientation" has got to be one of those concepts today. If you look up the word in a dictionary, you might be surprised by the number of definitions that have to do with finding directions on a compass. You know, like "orienteeing." (Find east. Find north. That sort of

thing.) In fact dictionaries aren't much help at all in this discussion,¹ which should tell us something right off the bat—the use and meaning of this word have changed incredibly fast. Too fast, it turns out, for the dictionaries to keep up. So instead of getting some official definition, here's a shot at giving a good street-level definition of how we're actually using the word.

What do most of us mean when we say *orientation*? How about something like this: “How you *are*, and *feel*, in the deepest part of you. Things you like. Ways you think. Things inside of you that you can't change, or at least can't easily change, even if you try hard. Probably, it's just the way you were born.” That seems to encompass most of what we mean these days when we use the word.

Of course, the reason the word has become so important is because of the idea of sexual orientation. And here, we *can* get a helpful “official” definition (and one that matches what most of us mean when we use the word). Try this: “Sexual orientation refers to an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, or both sexes. Sexual orientation also refers to a person's sense of identity based on those attractions, related behaviors, and membership in a community of others who share those attractions.” That's from the American Psychological Association.²

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kind of concept.

Here we should say something that might seem too obvious to mention, but which is helpful to state right out: *Sexual* orientation is a part of a larger, overall concept of orientation in *general*. And when it comes to people, and not just ideas, we could say that our sexual orientation is part of who we are as total people. In other words, (and this is so important to see at the start), “orientation” is a big, all-of-who-you-are kind of concept, and sexual orientation is only *part* of that. An important part, yes, but still, only a part.

Why go to the length of stating this? Because we tend to forget that the idea of orientation is bigger than the idea of sexual orientation, to the point that when we hear “orientation” we just think “sexual orientation.”

But sexual attractions don't *define* a person.

To say it another way, "*you are more than who you want to sleep with.*"³ Your attractions describe a part of you, but wouldn't you agree that it's a reductive view of who you are to say that they tell *everything* about you? What about how you love pasta? Or football? Or, secretly, Star Trek? Your hard-working-ness or your sick hoola-hoop skills or your algebra ability or your dream of starting a business that digs wells in third world countries...aren't these things part of you too?

Which is why, in our discussions, it seems helpful to acknowledge that the idea of orientation (to say it again) is a *big* thing—bigger even than

Your attractions describe a part of you, but do they tell the whole story?

sexual orientation. Maybe we could say it's something like, "all my innermost desires, drives, and tendencies which make up who I am and regularly initiate my actions." Something like that.

DOES THE BIBLE AGREE WITH OUR IDEA OF ORIENTATION?

It makes sense to bring the Bible into the discussion in a booklet like this because it's regularly brought in almost every time these things are talked about anyway. No one seems to be able to avoid it, even if they think they don't agree with it.⁴ So, since we're doing some "groundwork laying" let's ask the question: Does the Bible agree with this view of orientation as a big, overall description of who we are inside—a set of feelings and desires that drive our actions?

Totally.

Of course, you won't find the word "orientation" in any English Bibles that I'm aware of. That's because when the translators brought the Bible into our language, they used the word that most closely corresponded to the words the original authors of scripture used when they discussed this idea. And that word is "heart." Interestingly, that's true in both Hebrew (the language of the Old Testament) and Greek (the language of the New Testament).

One Old Testament scholar says this about Hebrew: *“Heart is the most important anthropological term in the Old Testament...No other English word combines the complex interplay of intellect, sensibility and will...The heart feels all modes of desire, from the lowest physical forms, such as hunger and thirst, to the highest, spiritual forms, like reverence and remorse...[The] direction or bent of the heart determines its decisions and thus the person’s actions.”*⁵

A New Testament scholar adds this: *“‘Heart’ is the term most commonly used in biblical literature for the essential personality. Whereas in English ‘heart’ tends to connote emotion, in both Hebrew and Greek it conveys equally, and perhaps more strongly, the spiritual and intellectual processes, including the will. It refers to what makes people what they really are, their individuality.”*⁶

So the Bible agrees with us: We all have within us a set of thoughts, feelings, and desires that make up the most essential part of who we are and that drive our actions.

A classic verse on this topic is Proverbs 4:23, which says “Guard your heart with all diligence, for out of it flow the issues of life.” In other words, *all your actions come from your heart.* (In the book of Proverbs especially, who you sleep with is included as part of the actions that come from your heart.) You get a very similar idea in Jesus’ teaching recorded in Mark 7:14-23.⁷

“Heart” is the Bible’s word for what makes people what they really are.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT OUR ORIENTATION?

Here’s where we can start to make headway by investigating things instead of assuming them. If the Bible agrees that we all possess an orientation, does it assume that, since we simply *have* an orientation, God is OK with that? In other words, does God approve of us just because we are a certain way inside?

This is important to ask, because closely attached to the idea of orientation today is the idea that, generally, if you are a certain

way (if you have a certain orientation), then it is good and right for you to live out that orientation, and it is good for you to be freed up to pursue your happiness according to this inner orientation. Since this is the way things are, we should realize that God made things this way, and therefore he does not disapprove of someone acting out of their deepest desires and innermost being. What matters is that we love each other by freeing each other up to find positive ways to live out this orientation in a culture free from oppression.

Isn't this basically what people say about God when he comes up in these conversations?

But how would we know if God did or didn't feel this way about our orientation? Have you ever noticed how lots of people make

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statements about God without any, well, evidence to back up what they say? One thing that the Bible is for followers of Jesus is a record of what God has said and a witness to what he's still saying today.⁸ So if we want to bring God into the discussion, we only have to look thoughtfully at scripture to see how he feels about a given situation.

And really, this is a massively relevant question, maybe *the* question, that's raised itself up today in so many of our

cultural discussions: *Are we as human beings basically acceptable to God, or does he require some fundamental change before he accepts us?* Does the fact that we *are* a certain way, or that our hearts are a certain way, mean that God is OK with us? Does God approve of our heart, our orientation, as it is?

The Bible's answer is no.

If this shocks you, please don't stop reading. But search through the Bible and you'll find a picture of a humanity who is fundamentally bent away from God, and who displeases and dishonors him because they act on their orientation. For instance, I recommend grabbing a Bible and looking up these passages: Genesis 6:5-6, Genesis 8:21, Deuteronomy 29:14-20, Psalm 81:8-13, Jeremiah 11:8, Jeremiah 18:11-12, Ephesians 2:1-3, Ephesians 4:17-19, and Hebrews 3:10-13. And this is only a representative sample.

This idea was explicitly stated when God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah and said, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; Who can know it?”⁹ That’s pretty hard-hitting. Not only is our heart “wicked” according to God (some translations say “sick”) but it’s so deceitful that we can’t even really know it or understand it.

This is huge.

Just like you wouldn’t ask a person who’s a pathological liar or a practical joker for directions, the Bible teaches that we can’t really find out anything we need to know by following where our heart leads. It’s deceitful, and it’s wicked.

At this point someone might say, “But wait, don’t Christians say God loves us? Doesn’t the Bible teach that God loves everyone?” And of course, we say, yes, and yes. But the question is, what does that mean? How does God love us? And right here, we can just say that God’s love is not universal approval of everything we are and everything we do. (Even our love for each other doesn’t operate this way, if you think about it.) Instead, God’s love is in the fact that he honestly diagnoses our situation, calls out evil and pain and brokenness for what they really are, and then provides a way out.¹⁰

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You could say that God, instead of simply leaving us to the whims of our orientation, provides a way for change.

Now, right here we might have kicked a hornets’ nest. Talking about change when discussing orientation is very controversial. But we might notice now that often that’s because we’ve reduced the concept of orientation down to ideas about sexual attraction. And how can we understand this *part* of our orientation without understanding the *whole* of who we are? So let’s keep pursuing the issue in terms of this biblical idea of overall orientation and *heart*.

CHOICE AND CHANGE: WHAT DO WE THINK?

What is our current cultural view of change? Well, if you examine it, all you really find is that it's inconsistent. For some orientations, (and sexual orientation is one of these) the idea is that you can't change. No matter what you do, you will always want to act out your sexual desires. And, many people agree that trying to suppress them is harmful. The only healthy, positive thing is to live them out. So...since you can't change it, you shouldn't try.

The inconsistency gets exposed when we realize that for many other things, the idea in our culture is that some people *should* suppress their desires. In this category we might we might put orientations

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towards things like alcoholism, anger, violence, racism, or laziness. And in the realm of sexual orientation, many people would probably generally agree that an orientation towards things like sexual expression with children, incest, or bestiality should be suppressed.

This holds whether or not someone feels like they can change. Our culture is even willing to tell someone that it is more *healthy* to suppress desires like these than

to pursue them.

Even if you find these things inside you, even if you feel like you were born with them, and you didn't choose the feelings and can't make them go away, many people (even our legal system) would demand that you suppress and work against those desires. We will not, as a culture, affirm them or free you up to pursue them.

People with these orientations will be told they should work to fight them or change them. They *must* change.

What this shows us is that we as a culture have said that there are some inner desires that should not be suppressed, and some that should be suppressed. Some that should be freely expressed and lived out, and some that should not.

And all we need to see is that these are *moral* judgments.

Doesn't this immediately beg the question: Where are we getting these morals? What moral authority do we have who gives us the right to make these judgments?

And there's another question that pops up here: How do we know what possibilities for change human beings have? How do we know if they are able to choose against their inner set of desires and drives? What do we say to those who have orientations which our culture generally agrees should *not* be lived out? What hope do we hold out for them?

In the Bible Christians find direction for both these questions. First, we have God communicating his character to us in ways that show us clearly which parts of our orientation must be resisted (things like anger, selfishness, pride, and lust). Second, we have God's directions for both choice and change.

TAKING THE FIRST STEP

A helpful way to start thinking about the Bible's view of how choice and change interact is to see what Jesus said when he was here on earth. Matthew, one of his early followers, reports that he began his public teaching ministry by saying "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."¹¹ The biblical word "repent" contains the idea of a change of direction. Jesus said, "Turn." You could even say that he meant something like, "Choose to change." And we know that he spent much of his life telling people to change: to turn away from things he said were sinful or degrading or God-dishonoring and to turn to God instead.

But Jesus didn't live in a fantasy world. He recognized that change wasn't easy for people. For instance, Jesus taught that when someone commits sin (which we all have), they become hopelessly enslaved to sin.¹² In fact, he was right in line with the rest of the Bible's teaching about change, which is that, in some sense, it's impossible.¹³

So we're faced with what seems like a paradox: God calls for us to change, and yet acknowledges that we kind of...can't. What's going on here?

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There's one passage in the book of Jeremiah where this issue comes to a head between God and the nation of Israel. God was using Jeremiah to call them out for their sins, and he even went so far as to predict that he would soon bring judgment on their land in response to their awful moral condition. But God also said that bringing judgment wasn't his first choice. Instead, he invited the people to turn back to him, and turn away from their evil ways. Jeremiah reported it like this: God said, "Turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions." And the people replied back to God, "That is hopeless! So we will walk according to our own plans, and we will every one obey the dictates of his evil heart."¹⁴

When we're faced with God's commands to repent and change, we may be tempted to say with the Israelites, "It's hopeless!" And without God, it may be. We find in ourselves things which the Bible calls sinful—desires and drives we constantly want to live out. We may choose to resist, but eventually lose the will to resist under the intense pressure of the desires. In other words, *we may have the physical ability to resist, but we may lack the moral power*. God calls this slavery to sin, or having an incurable heart. It makes us guilty in his eyes, since we *choose to not resist* the inner desires which we could physically resist.

The key to finding our way out of this impasse is to understand that, throughout the entire Bible, God holds out the idea for us that his words have power. When God says, "Let there be light," light happens. When Jesus says, "Lazarus, come out of there," a dead man walks out of a grave. And when God calls us to repent, as we trust that he has the power to make it happen, and we choose to change our minds and physically resist sin, we find him supplying the power for us to turn and begin to live in ways that honor him.

This is one of the most unknown aspects of the Christian message, and one of the most powerful. Because right after Jesus proclaimed that whoever committed sin was a slave of sin, he said that whoever *he* set free would be truly free.¹⁵ In fact, the writers of the Bible proclaimed that God had the remedy for our entire orientation problem and everything that went with it. He can proclaim the guilty righteous; he can dispel the influence of spiritual darkness; he can bring life out of death.¹⁶

So when God acknowledges that I have an orientation that is bent in directions he does not approve of, he's not saying that he hates me for who I am. When He calls for me to change in order to find his approval, he doesn't leave me to my own power to make those things happen. His love comes to me as the universal offer of forgiveness for what I've already done, and the unconditional offer of his own power to resist my orientation in order to live a life that's free from slavery to a bad heart. As I believe what he says, he gives me the power that he demands that I have.

In fact, there are many statements in the Bible that indicate that God grants a whole new identity, with a new set of drives and inclinations—a whole new heart (a new “orientation”!) in place of my old one.¹⁷

THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT OUR ORIENTATION

This total salvation is good news for all of us.

We feel the truth of this most acutely when we remember that all of us have orientation issues when we're measured by God's standards. All of us need repentance and change to find the “peace with God” that the apostle Paul described.¹⁸ This is why we so desperately need to see God's commands about our *sexual* orientations in light of his commands about our *entire* orientation. We just can't understand what he has to say about our attractions without understanding what he has to say about our whole selves.

Instead of continuing to tell God he should be OK with us just the way we are, and that it is hopeless to tell us to change, we can listen to a God who has the knowledge we need to find true life and wholeness, and who has the power to get us there.

When you hear God's word and believe it to the point of trusting it to act on it, God saves all of you—your spirit, your body, your orientation—and he begins his work of redeeming and changing you from the inside out to get you ready for the eternal life he has planned.

Notes:

1. I write this from personal experience. But then, maybe I need something better than dictionary.com...
2. From <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/sexual-orientation.aspx>
3. This is in quotes because I think I read this sentence somewhere. But I haven't been able to find or remember where.
4. Like for instance, in Macklemore's song "Same Love." He gets to the Bible in the first verse, and quotes the Bible on the song's outro. And this is very normal.
5. From Bruce Waltke's commentary *The Book of Proverbs*, Vol. 1. pg. 90-91
6. From R.T France's commentary *The Gospel of Mark*, pg. 291
7. I recommend a thorough reading and thinking through this teaching for anyone wanting to understand all these things more deeply.
8. For an exploration of how this could be true, see the TCSI booklet *What is the Bible?* Available free online at <http://www.truthoncampus.com/resources>
9. That's from the New King James Version—Jeremiah 17:9.
10. For a fuller discussion of the ideas surrounding God's love, see the TCSI booklet *How is God Love?* Available free online at www.truthoncampus.com
11. Matthew 4:17
12. See John 8:31-34
13. See Romans 3:10-19, Eph 2:1-3, Jer 17:9
14. This exchange is found in Jeremiah 18:11-12.
15. That's in John 8:31-36
16. See Romans 3:21-26, Ephesians 2:4-11, and Colossians 1:13
17. If you didn't know the Bible offered this, you've got to read Ezekiel 36:25-28 and Jeremiah 31:33
18. Romans 5:1

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

If any of the ideas in this booklet got you thinking, here are some excellent books to keep your thinking going. **Rosaria Butterfield's personal testimony *Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor's Journey into the Christian Faith*** is a compelling first-hand account of grappling with identity issues and the teachings of scripture. And even though sexual orientation is not all there is to orientation, many picking up this booklet might be interested in continuing to explore the Bible's take on these things. With that in mind, ***Is God Anti-Gay?* by Sam Alberry** is a very short yet thorough and helpful look at some of these things.

If you want to start a conversation directly, speak to the leader of the campus group you're a part of or the person who gave you this booklet, or get in touch with us at talk@truthoncampus.com.

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Who we are:

Truth On Campus seeks to equip students on college and university campuses, to cultivate Christian thinking and living in the academic environment, and to spread the gospel. Working with existing campus groups, we aim to help you with free resources discussing the issues Christian students face, as well as addressing the “big questions” that all people ponder. Truth On Campus is based out of Calvary Chapel of Philadelphia, online at www.ccphilly.org.

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