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## **Bridging the Gay-Evangelical Divide**

**Extreme opinions move toward the middle.**

**By DAVID G. MYERS**

'Efforts to change sexual orientation are unlikely to be successful and involve some risk of harm.' So says a new American Psychological Association report affirmed by its governing body in a 125-to-4 vote. No surprise there, given the past advice of the APA—and of other mental-health associations—against sexual-reorientation therapies.

What has raised some eyebrows was the APA's olive branch to religious conservatives. Reaffirming "individuals' right to their own religious beliefs," the report provides guidance to counselors whose religious clients feel distressed about their same-sex attractions. It encourages them to remind their clients that gay people can live happy lives and that there is no evidence to support the belief that sexual orientation can change. But if clients reject a gay identity anyway, declared the APA, then it would be ethical to help them reconcile their religious and sexual identities and to assist them in managing their behavior, including refraining from sexual activity.

Applause for the APA's sensitivity to religious diversity has come from previously opposing sides within evangelicalism. Psychotherapist Ralph Blair, the founder of Evangelicals Concerned, the gay-supporting "national network of gay and lesbian evangelical Christians and friends," welcomes APA's "clear rejection of 'reparative therapy.'" But he also welcomes its openness to supporting homosexual people "who nonetheless think that it's wrong for them to act on their same-sex desires." Grove City College psychologist-blogger Warren Throckmorton, who supports those who want to control same-sex attractions and reject a gay identity, sees hope for "a larger middle and smaller numbers of people at the opinion extremes. People on both sides, he says, "can agree that erotic responsiveness is extremely durable."

This emerging professional consensus—that one's sexual orientation is a natural, enduring disposition—has gained strength from scientists who have, in recent years, discovered gay-straight differences in brain centers, fingerprint patterns and, it appears, the womb: The more biological older brothers a man has, the greater the likelihood of same-sex orientation.

Even conservative Focus on the Family now agrees with the APA on this much: "We do not believe anyone chooses his or her same-sex attractions." Focus adds that, for men and women who struggle with the issue, the aim is "to steward their impulses in a way that aligns with their faith convictions." Focus on the Family has not reversed its encouragement of sexual-reorientation efforts, but it is passing off sponsorship of its money-losing "Love Won Out" seminars on "leaving homosexuality."

Some of the conflict about same-sex attractions stems from disagreements about biblical texts. On one side are those who assume the literal meaning of seven proscriptive passages, especially in Leviticus and Romans. On the other are those who say that these few texts are slim pickings among the Bible's 31,103 verses and that such texts usually also condemn other actions (such as child exploitation, promiscuity or idolatry) and never a natural orientation. But biblical scholars are working to resolve the differences, as they did with earlier debates over slavery, race and gender.

Anecdotes of ex-gays continue to be heard, but they are offset by a growing list of ex-ex-gays, including more than a dozen former ex-gay group leaders. The British evangelical organization Courage once aimed to assist those struggling with "the clear biblical prohibition of homosexual practice." But no longer. Acknowledging the harm done by its fruitless sexual-reorientation efforts, Courage has become a place for "gay and lesbian Christians who are seeking a safe place of friendship in which to reconcile their faith and sexuality."

Perhaps one day we will see traditionalists asking themselves whether the world would be a happier and healthier place if, for *all* people, love, sex and, yes, marriage went together. In the meantime, the increasing common ground between social scientists and religious conservatives is a small miracle in itself.

**Mr. Myers, a social psychologist, is co-author, with Letha Dawson Scanzoni, of "What God Has Joined Together: The Christian Case for Gay Marriage" (HarperOne).**

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