

# **A Reassessment of Same-Sex Attraction in Light of James, Hebrews, and the Natural–Unnatural Distinction**

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## **Abstract**

Contemporary discussions of same-sex attraction (SSA) within Christian ethics often hinge upon the question of whether involuntary desire itself constitutes sin or merely temptation unto sin. This essay argues that the biblical category of concupiscence—understood as disordered desire arising from original sin—provides a crucial but frequently neglected framework for adjudicating this question. By examining James’s account of temptation (James 1:13–15), Hebrews’ claim regarding Christ’s testing (Hebrews 4:15), and the biblical distinction between “natural” and “unnatural” desires (Romans 1:26–27), this study contends that all sin proceeds from disordered desire, yet not all desires are morally equivalent. Same-sex attraction represents not merely the abuse of a good desire but the presence of an intrinsically disordered inclination,<sup>1</sup> fundamentally distinct from heterosexual lust. Anticipated objections—especially appeals to moral symmetry and experiential neutrality—are addressed and evaluated.

## **Introduction: Why?**

Perhaps you’ll receive this paper in an email from a pastor or fellow elder. Perhaps you’ll come across it via a blog, website, or social media post. You might receive it angrily or with a sense of happy relief. However this paper gets to you, you’ll inevitably ask the same question the authors did: why? Why has this issue come up? Why is the EPC talking about this – again? How did the denomination get here? In 2022, Memorial Presbyterian Church in St. Louis began exploring the possibility of membership in the EPC. Memorial’s pastor is Teaching Elder Greg Johnson. Johnson and Memorial Presbyterian were members of the Presbyterian Church in America until 2022, when the church left the denomination to become independent. Memorial’s exit was prompted by drawn-out debate and disciplinary proceedings between Memorial, TE Johnson, and the PCA. At the heart of these proceedings is TE Johnson’s own sexuality, as well as his public teaching on the subject. TE Johnson has publicly and repeatedly professed himself as a same-sex attracted man. Johnson claims to be celibate, but his confession raised serious questions in the PCA about Johnson’s fitness for ordination and gospel ministry. Unfortunately, before those

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<sup>1</sup> By “intrinsically disordered,” this essay does not mean psychologically unintelligible or uniquely heinous, nor does it collapse same-sex attraction into every other form of sexual disorder (such as incest or bestiality, each of which Scripture addresses in its own context with its own pastoral realities). Rather, the phrase denotes a desire whose object cannot be ordered toward a godly *telos* under any covenantal condition. In the EPC’s present discussion, SSA is the specific inclination in view because it exemplifies an enduring pattern that—unlike heterosexual lust—has no redemptive trajectory within the creational design of male-female complementarity and covenant marriage (Geneses 1–2; Romans 1:26–27; Ephesians 5:31–32).

concerns could be adjudicated at a Presbytery or General Assembly level, Johnson and Memorial left the PCA.

The roots of the current controversy in the EPC reach back at least to December 2022, when denominational guidance was given regarding the reception and examination of candidates and churches associated with same-sex attraction ministry. As the possibility of Johnson's entrance into the EPC grew, the 2024 EPC General Assembly appointed an Ad-Interim Committee on SSA (same-sex attraction) and Ordination to study the relevant practical and theological issues. So far, the Committee has proposed changes and revisions to the EPC's Book of Government, Position Paper on Human Sexuality, as well as portions of the Pastoral Letter on Human Sexuality. As of this writing in early 2026, the Committee has published several drafts of its work. Members of the Committee have traveled to Presbytery meetings across the country to solicit feedback and have provided an online portal for the same purpose. The final report and recommendations of the Committee are slated to come before the General Assembly in June of 2026. It remains to be seen what changes the Committee will make before final publication and how the General Assembly of the EPC will vote on the final draft.

So why this paper? The authors believe that both Scripture and Reformed Tradition speak clearly to the issue of unnatural sinful desire as it relates to an individual's fitness for ordination in the church. The paper does not explicitly agree with nor dissent from the work of the Committee. Rather, it proposes to add to an ongoing discussion in the EPC. The paper argues that the biblical category of concupiscence—defined as disordered desire arising from original sin — provides a crucial but frequently neglected framework that informs the ongoing discussion of unnatural sinful desire and ordination. By examining James's account of temptation (James 1:13-15), Hebrews' claim regarding Christ's testing (Hebrews 4:15), and the biblical distinction between "natural" and "unnatural" desires (Romans 1:26-27), this study contends that all sin proceeds from disordered desire, yet not all desires are morally equivalent. Same-sex attraction represents not merely the abuse of a good desire but the presence of an intrinsically disordered inclination that is fundamentally distinct from heterosexual lust. Anticipated objections are addressed and evaluated. 2 Brothers and sisters, we offer this paper not as a final word, but in hopes of serving our shared desire for biblical clarity and pastoral faithfulness as the EPC considers these important questions.

## **Summary of Argument**

This document presents an expanded, non-technical summary of a theological paper addressing unnatural sinful desire, temptation, and ordination. It is written for Ruling Elders and Deacons who are charged with guarding doctrine, shepherding Christ's people, and discerning fitness for church office. The goal is clarity, not controversy, and pastoral faithfulness rather than polemics.

## **What Is the Actual Question Before the Church?**

The central question is often framed incorrectly. The issue is not whether a person who experiences same-sex attraction may be a genuine Christian. Scripture is clear that salvation rests

entirely on union with Christ by grace alone through faith alone. Many believers continue to struggle with deep, entrenched sins and desires even after conversion. The real question concerns suitability for church office. Ordination is not a personal right or an affirmation of identity; it is a public trust. Elders and Deacons are called to model, teach, and represent God’s design for creation, redemption, and holiness. The church must therefore ask not only whether a person is sincere or self-controlled, but whether the shape of their life coheres with what the office itself is meant to signify.

## I. James and the Moral Logic of Temptation

James’s account of temptation presents a critical interiorized moral psychology:

Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. (James 1:13–15).

Two foundational claims emerge. First, *God does not tempt*, He only *tests* (*πειράζειν*).<sup>2</sup> Second, temptation becomes morally operative only when a test encounters *disordered desire* (*ἐπιθυμία*).<sup>3</sup> James does not treat desire as morally neutral raw material awaiting ethical direction;<sup>4</sup> rather, desire itself, when misaligned, functions as the causal agent that transforms divine testing—designed for our maturity when filtered through godly wisdom (James 1:5-8)—into sinful<sup>5</sup> temptation. In short, God sends tests, but our disordered desires bring them down to the category of temptation.

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<sup>2</sup> James uses the same root word for these two terms. Context determines translation. In James 1:2, we translate it as “tests/trials,” whereas in 13-15 we translate it as “tempt.”

<sup>3</sup> This distinction does not deny the reality of external enticement. Scripture clearly recognizes that people may face persuasive, seductive, or deceptive pressures from outside themselves—whether from Satan, the world, or particular circumstances. Such external pressures are real and can be severe. Yet James’s point is that external enticement, by itself, is not what makes temptation morally operative. The decisive issue is the condition of the heart that receives it. God may ordain trials that test faith, and fallen creatures may present occasions of enticement, but God never authors evil desire or inward corruption (WCF 5.4). Temptation, in the morally culpable sense James describes, arises when external pressure meets internal disorder. Thus, Scripture preserves both truths: the reality of external testing and enticement, and the fact that the sinfulness of temptation proceeds from the creature rather than from God.

<sup>4</sup> Augustine insists that concupiscence is “sin dwelling in us,” even when not consented to in act—even in such matters as dreams which we have no control over (*Confessions* X.30-31, *On Marriage and Concupiscence* I. 25-27). “Is not Thy hand able, O Almighty God, to heal all the diseases of my soul, and by Thy more abundant grace to quench even the lascivious motions of my sleep?” (*Confessions* X.30.42).

<sup>5</sup> Throughout this essay, “sin” is used in the classical Augustinian and Reformed sense to denote moral disorder and corruption of nature, not to assert equal degrees of culpability or condemnation. Scripture itself distinguishes between indwelling sin and reigning sin, between corruption and imputation, without denying the moral reality of either.

This has profound implications. Temptation is not an externally imposed moral event but an internal failure of wisdom (James 1:5–8). Where godly wisdom is lacking, the trial is “brought down” to the level of temptation by the disorder of the heart. In James’s moral universe, temptation is already *evidence* of sin’s presence—not yet its consummation, but its conception.<sup>6</sup>

John Calvin writes, “We, on the other hand, deem it sin when a man is tickled by any desire at all against the law of God. Indeed, we label ‘sin’ that very depravity which begets in us desires of this sort.” Thus, temptation is not merely adjacent to sin—it is the incipient movement of sin itself.

## II. Hebrews 4:15 and the Reframing of Christ’s “Temptation”

Hebrews famously asserts: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted (*πειράζω*) as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:15). This verse is frequently invoked to argue that temptation, even when intense and persistent is, in itself, not sinful. However, as the hermeneutical principle of Reformed interpretation requires: Scripture must help us to interpret Scripture. Reading *πειράζω* as “tempted” in Hebrews fails to integrate the epistle with James’s account of temptation’s internal origin.

The often-overlooked interpretive move lies in recognizing that *πειράζω*—as we’ve seen in James—can denote either *testing* or *temptation*, depending on context. James is clearly writing of *internal* temptation in James 1:13-16 arising from disordered desires. Hebrews, on the other hand, primarily emphasizes Christ’s comprehensive *external testing*, which is not automatically sin. Hebrews does not specify that Christ experienced temptation arising from disordered desire—only that He underwent comprehensive *testing*—as James says is common to all men in James 1:1-2.<sup>7</sup> Thus, Hebrews does not contradict James’s moral logic but assumes it, since both operate within a shared moral anthropology in which testing is morally neutral until it encounters the heart’s orientation.

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<sup>6</sup> WCF 6.5 “This corruption of nature... doth remain in those that are regenerated; and although it be, through Christ, pardoned and mortified, yet both itself, and all the motions thereof, are truly and properly sin.”

<sup>7</sup> Calvin explicitly denies concupiscence in Christ’s human nature while affirming real human testing: “No wonder, then, that Christ, through whom integrity was to be restored, was exempted from common corruption!” (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.13.4). Here, Calvin carefully distinguishes Christ’s assumed human affections from fallen concupiscence, insisting that Christ’s temptations—as wholly externally generated—were real yet untouched by inward corruption. WCF 8.2 establishes that Christ assumed human nature without inherited corruption, and Hebrews 7:26 describes him as “holy, innocent, unstained, *separated from sinners*.” The absence of concupiscence in Christ is therefore a dogmatic claim prior to and independent of James’s moral logic. The virgin birth is precisely the mechanism by which original sin’s transmission is interrupted (Luke 1:35). Given this, *πειράζω* in Hebrews 4:15 cannot denote temptation arising from internal disordered desire—not because James forbids it, but because Christology does. The two texts then confirm rather than interpret each other.

Interestingly, Scripture records only two instances in which human beings are tempted through *external* persuasive discourse by a non-human personal agent (Satan, in both cases):<sup>8</sup>

1. Eve in Genesis 3<sup>9</sup>
2. Jesus in the wilderness (Matthew 4; Luke 4)

In both cases the human subject is morally uncorrupted—Eve before the fall, Christ in his sinless humanity. This is no coincidence. Satan does not “draw out” an inwardly disordered desire but attempts to implant a false moral vision through deception and persuasion. In other words, the temptation does not arise from within; it presses from without. Thus, Christ was *tested* in every way we are—hunger, suffering, obedience, trust—yet without sin. But he was not *tempted* in every way we are because he was without the internal disorder (original sin) that transforms testing into temptation. His testing never passed through concupiscence. Hebrews therefore does not teach that Christ shared our fallen internal temptations, but that He endured the full weight of testing as the sinless *Second Adam*.

### III. Concupiscence as the Universal Root of Sin

If James’ moral logic is correct, then all sin arises from disordered desire. Concupiscence is not one moral category among many, rather, it is the condition of fallen humanity. This point is classically recognized in Augustinian and Reformed theology, where concupiscence is not reducible to overt acts but refers to the heart’s fundamental misalignment toward God and neighbor. Sin is not merely chosen, it is generated by our fallen will. However, affirming that all sin arises from concupiscence does not entail that all desires are morally equivalent. Scripture itself differentiates between kinds of desire, both in intensity and in kind.

In order to distinguish between kinds of disordered desire without collapsing into moral equivalence, Scripture consistently evaluates desire along three interrelated axes: the object of desire,<sup>10</sup> the orientation of desire,<sup>11</sup> and the telos toward which desire moves.<sup>12</sup> First, desire is morally evaluated according to its *object*—that which is desired. Second, desire is evaluated according to its *orientation*, that is, whether it accords with or deviates from the creational differentiation God has established. Third, desire is evaluated according to its *telos*, the end or fulfillment toward which it moves within God’s covenantal ordering of the world.

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<sup>8</sup> Granted, Scripture records many instances of external enticement, but only two instances in which temptation takes the form of direct persuasive discourse aimed at reconfiguring moral perception from ordered to disordered—and in both cases, the subjects lack original sin.

<sup>9</sup> And of course, Adam federally by listening to the voice of Eve.

<sup>10</sup> Exodus 20:17; Micah 2:2; James 4:2; Matthew 5:28.

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 1:27-28, 2:18-25; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 11:14-15.

<sup>12</sup> Proverbs 5:18-19; Malachi 2:14-15; Romans 12:1-2; Ephesians 5:31-32; 1 Corinthians 7:2-5.

These distinctions are not later philosophical impositions but arise from Scripture’s own reasoning. They allow the biblical authors to condemn some desires as misuses of good gifts while identifying others as contrary to the created logic of the thing itself. The following sections apply this triadic moral framework to the question of same-sex attraction.

#### IV. SSA, Natural, and Unnatural Desire in Biblical Ethics

Contemporary discussions of same-sex attraction (hereafter referenced with Paul’s language “unnatural sinful desire”)<sup>13</sup> within Christian ethics often hinge upon the question of whether involuntary desire itself constitutes sin or merely temptation. The conversations frequently frame unnatural sinful desires in terms of “orientation,” treating it as a morally neutral descriptor of identity rather than a morally assessable inclination. While such language may serve descriptive or psychological purposes, Scripture does not evaluate desire according to identity categories *but according to moral correspondence with creation order*.<sup>14</sup>

Biblical ethics consistently assesses desire in relation to its object and *telos* rather than its phenomenological persistence or experiential depth. As such, the category of “orientation,” while descriptively useful, cannot function as a morally determinative category within Christian theology. Moral theology must norm psychological description, not be governed by it.<sup>15</sup>

As such, this essay has argued that the biblical category of *concupiscence*—understood as disordered desire arising from original sin—provides a crucial but frequently neglected framework for adjudicating this question. By examining James’s account of temptation (James 1:13–15) alongside Hebrews’ claim regarding Christ’s testing (Hebrews 4:15), the biblical distinction between “natural” and “unnatural” desires (Romans 1:26–27) becomes central to the discussion of unnatural sinful desire and ordination. A properly framed theology of concupiscence that aligns with Calvin, Luther, Sproul, Augustine, and others then allows us to re-introduce proper definitions of the terms “natural” and “unnatural” desires that have been lost.

Romans 1:18–27 provides the most explicit biblical distinction on the heels of a treatise on the created order.

<sup>18</sup>For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. <sup>19</sup>For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. <sup>20</sup>For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly

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<sup>13</sup> While “SSA” is a contemporary descriptive shorthand, such terminology can obscure Scripture’s moral categories by suggesting a neutral psychological state detached from moral evaluation.

<sup>14</sup> Scripture does not treat enduring inclinations as morally neutral simply because they are experienced rather than chosen. The heart itself is subject to moral judgment (Proverbs 4:23; Jeremiah 17:9), and believers are commanded to mortify not merely actions but desires (Colossians 3:5).

<sup>15</sup> Scripture consistently distinguishes the person from the desires that war within him (Romans 7:17; Galatians 5:17), refusing to equate moral identity with felt inclination.

perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. <sup>21</sup>For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. <sup>22</sup>Claiming to be wise, they became fools, <sup>23</sup>and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. <sup>24</sup>Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, <sup>25</sup>because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. <sup>26</sup>*For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; <sup>27</sup>and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.*

Importantly, Paul does not isolate unnatural sinful desire as a private struggle detached from larger theological realities. In Romans 1, same-sex passions are presented as one manifestation of humanity's deeper exchange: the exchange of the Creator for the creature. Romans 1 presents same-sex passions as one especially vivid manifestation of this exact idolatrous transfer. Admittedly, while all lust can become idolatrous, Paul uniquely identifies unnatural sinful desire as *paradigmatic* of desire disordered at the level of creational design itself.<sup>16</sup> As such, the issue cannot be relegated to disordered erotic desire in abstraction, but desire that reflects and participates in the broader distortion of worship. This is what makes Paul's logic qualitatively different from his treatment of heterosexual lust elsewhere.

## V. "According to Nature" in Scripture: Ontological, Teleological, and Covenantal

### Dimensions

When Scripture speaks of desires as natural (*φυσικός*) or unnatural (*παρὰ φύσιν*), it is not appealing to cultural custom or statistical majority.<sup>17</sup> Rather, "nature" functions as a *normative category grounded in creation order, teleology, covenantal purpose, and the moral wisdom of God reflected in His law and holy character.*

Biblically, "nature" refers first to what God has made and ordered (Gen 1–2). Human sexuality is not an undifferentiated capacity but is "sexed" from the beginning, oriented toward complementarity, fruitfulness, and covenantal union (Gen 1:27–28; 2:18–25). This is explicitly called *wholeness*—Adam and Eve become "one flesh." This is an extraordinary eschatological action. Throughout the creation narrative, God divides: land, water, heavens, etc. But after he

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<sup>16</sup> Moreover, a person who struggles with heterosexual lust may not be suited for ordained office.

<sup>17</sup> In Calvin's *Commentary on Romans* he explicitly argues that "against nature" refers to *creation order* (Calvin's *Commentary on Romans* 1:26-27)

separates Eve from Adam, he immediately joins them together again, making them *whole*. The only aspect of creation that is in its prefigured consummated state is found in Adam and Eve.

This hope is mirrored in Christ and his church, and modeled by an elder, who is a husband of one wife.<sup>18</sup> Thus, desire is “natural” when it:

1. Corresponds to the creational differentiation of male and female,
2. Moves toward the telos for which that differentiation exists,
3. And remains intelligible within God’s ordering of the world.

“Unnatural,” therefore, does not mean “rare” or “socially disfavored,” but *contrary to the created logic of the thing itself*.<sup>19</sup> Paul’s language in Romans 1 is precise: same-sex relations are not described as an excess of desire (e.g., too much passion) but as an exchange—a movement away from what is *according to nature* toward what is *against nature* (Romans 1:26).<sup>20</sup> This exchange language is critical. It implies that the desire itself is misdirected at the level of *object*, not merely *degree*. This distinction allows us to avoid a common but deeply flawed moral equivalence: “All lust is the same.” Scripture does not support this flattening.

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<sup>18</sup> The phrase “husband of one wife” (μἰᾶς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα) is often reduced to a narrow prohibition against polygamy. While that historical concern may be present, such a reading misses the positive, prescriptive force of the construction. The numeral “one” (μἰᾶ) echoes Genesis 2:24—“they shall become one flesh”—which Paul immediately applies to “Christ and the church” (Ephesians 5:31–32). The requirement is therefore not simply “not a polygamist” but a demand that the elder’s own life visibly embody the *telos of creational sexuality*: desire whose object is the opposite sex, whose orientation accords with male-female complementarity, and whose end is the covenantal, one-flesh union that images Christ and his Bride. An enduring pattern of desire whose object cannot be ordered toward any godly covenantal fulfillment (i.e., same-sex attraction) is thus incompatible with the representational character of the office, not because it violates a behavioral checklist, but because it fails to cohere with the teleological wholeness the qualification is meant to signify. See also the creational grounding in 1 Timothy 2:13–15 and the household order analogy in 1 Timothy 3:4–5.

This positive reading requires distinguishing behavioral compliance from representational coherence. A celibate heterosexual elder has no wife, but his desire-structure still orients toward the creational complementarity the office signifies. An elder with an enduring pattern of same-sex desire lacks that orientation entirely—his desires are not merely un-acted upon but structurally incompatible with what the office represents. Behavioral restraint and representational coherence are not the same thing. The office requires the latter.

<sup>19</sup> Francis Turretin grounds moral “nature” in creation, teleology, and divine intention in *Institutes*, Topic 11 (The Law), Q. 2-3.

<sup>20</sup> As Robert Gagnon and others have noted, Paul’s use of *παρὰ φύσιν* (“against nature”) in Romans 1 is not just a description of social deviance but reflects a violation of the created structure of male-female complementarity. As such, Paul’s argument depends upon Genesis categories, not Greco-Roman convention (Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), esp. 155.)

## VI. Heterosexual Lust: Abuse of a Good Desire

Heterosexual desire, even when sinful (e.g., lust, adultery, fornication), remains *desire for a rightly ordered object*—the opposite sex—pursued in a wrong way, wrong time, or wrong covenantal context.<sup>21</sup> In other words:

1. The object of desire is good.
2. The orientation of desire is creationally ordered
3. The sin lies in misuse, mis-timing, or misappropriation.

The common categorical error can be seen when alcoholism is used as an equitable example. Alcohol, in itself is an ordered good. God gives us the fruit of the vine to enjoy, to warm our bellies, to celebrate with. Christ himself turned water into wine for a feast as his first recorded miracle. But it is when this ordered good is misused, that it becomes sinful. This is why Scripture can speak of the purification, disciplining, and right ordering of sexual desire without denying its fundamental goodness (cf. Proverbs 5; Song of Songs; 1 Corinthians 7).

By contrast, unnatural sinful desire is not the misuse of a good sexual desire but *desire directed toward an object Scripture identifies as contrary to nature*.<sup>22</sup> As Robert Gagnon explains, “Same-sex eroticism functions as a particularly poignant example of human enslavement to passions and of God’s just judgment precisely because it parallels in the horizontal-ethical dimension a denial of God’s reality like that of idolatry in the vertical-divine dimension.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, the difference is not merely behavioral but ontological:

1. The object of desire is not ordered toward the creational telos of sex.
2. The desire cannot be fulfilled rightly under any covenantal condition.
3. The inclination itself is therefore intrinsically disordered.

This is why Scripture never envisions a “redeemed” or “proper” form of same-sex erotic desire. Rather than being disciplined, redirected, or covenantally fulfilled, such desire is consistently grouped with the desires of the flesh that must be crucified, not re-ordered:

*<sup>16</sup>But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. <sup>17</sup>For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to*

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<sup>21</sup> Again, Augustine is helpful. In *Confessions II* and *X*, see his treatment of lust as *misdirected good* rather than inverted object.

<sup>22</sup> Calvin speaks of mortification as correcting *inordinate desires*, not redefining objects (Institutes, III. 3.10)

<sup>23</sup> Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*, 155.

do. <sup>18</sup>But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. <sup>19</sup>Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, <sup>20</sup>idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, <sup>21</sup>envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. <sup>22</sup>But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup>gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. <sup>24</sup>*And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires* (Galatians 5:16–24).

See also:

<sup>9</sup>Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, <sup>10</sup>nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. <sup>11</sup>*And such were some of you*. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:9–11).

In neither passage is unnatural sinful desire presented as a good inclination requiring right ordering. Instead, it is subsumed under the category of “fleshly passions” to be put to death (Galatians 5:24), even as those who once practiced such sins are fully justified and sanctified in Christ (1 Corinthians 6:11). Redemption, in this sense, entails the mortification of the desire itself, not its covenantal fulfillment.

These distinctions are already implicit in Levitical prohibitions, but Paul makes it explicit by grounding sexual ethics not in ceremonial law but in *creation theology* (Romans 1), where unnatural sinful desire itself is described as a result of disordered exchange, rather than a good desire misdirected (Romans 1:26-27). Here we return to concupiscence. If concupiscence is *disordered desire arising from the fall*, then the moral question is not simply whether a desire is involuntary, but *whether the desire corresponds to God’s created order*. Critically, Scripture consistently treats involuntary inclinations as morally significant:

1. Coveting is condemned prior to action (Exodus 20:17).
2. Jesus locates adultery in the heart (Matthew 5:28).
3. James treats desire as the womb of sin (James 1:14–15).

Thus, the claim that unnatural sinful desire is morally neutral because it is experienced rather than chosen fails on biblical grounds. *Desire itself is subject to moral evaluation*, precisely because it flows from a corrupted nature.

## **VII. Why Unnatural Sinful Desire Must Be Evaluated According to James Moral Logic**

Here is the crucial theological distinction:

1. Heterosexual lust is *concupiscence misdirecting a natural desire*.
2. Unnatural sinful desire is *concupiscence producing an unnatural desire*.

Both arise from the fall, but they are not morally symmetrical. One distorts the use of a good gift; the other reflects a distortion of orientation itself. This does not mean that one sin is more damning than another in terms of guilt before God—but it does mean they are not the same *kind* of moral phenomenon, and that difference is directly relevant to ordained office.

Heterosexual lust, however serious, is a disorder of degree and context. Its object remains creationally ordered; its trajectory, when mortified and disciplined, moves toward what the office itself signifies. Unnatural sinful desire is a disorder of kind. Its object has no redemptive trajectory within creational order, and its orientation runs contrary to the very reality the office is meant to embody.

Ordination in the Reformed tradition includes functional authorization but also representational vocation. Church officers do not simply perform tasks; they embody and publicly signify theological truths concerning creation, redemption, and consummation. Because ecclesial office is tied to the public teaching of creation and redemption, Scripture repeatedly grounds its qualifications in creational realities rather than merely private spirituality (Ephesians 5:31–32; 1 Timothy 2:13–15). As such, ecclesial office is expected to demonstrate visible patterns of life that accord with creational order, particularly in matters of marriage and sexuality.

The qualifications for office therefore concern not only personal restraint from sinful acts, but the coherence between an officer's embodied life and what the office is meant to represent. Because ordination is a public trust, the church must consider not only whether a man is resisting particular sinful desires, but whether the enduring pattern of desires he describes coheres with the office's visible witness to creation, holiness, and Christ's relation to His church. Thus, the question is not whether an officer continues to battle indwelling sin—this is assumed—but whether the structure of his desires publicly contradicts the creational and covenantal realities the office signifies. This is why Scripture frames ordination standards in representational terms rather than merely behavioral ones.

An elder is not disqualified merely because he battles sin—all elders do. He is disqualified when the structure of his desires publicly contradicts the creational and covenantal realities his office is meant to represent. This is not a distinction between greater and lesser sinners. It is a distinction between kinds of disorder and the coherence each bears—or fails to bear—with the visible witness of ordained vocation.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Saying that Scripture frames ordination standards representationally means assessing whether an officeholder's public life coheres with the creational and covenantal realities the office signifies (1 Timothy 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9). Household order functions as a visible analogy for ecclesial authority (1 Tim 3:4–5), while marriage itself bears typological weight as a sign of Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:31–32; cf. Genesis 2:24). In this way, ordination concerns symbolic coherence rather than comparative moral failure.

## VIII. Doesn't This Advocate for a Two-Tiered Moral Experience?

This pastoral objection rightly warns against language that dehumanizes or stigmatizes; however, pastoral *sensitivity* cannot override moral *clarity*. Scripture itself diagnoses different sins differently without implying unequal worth of persons. A moral distinction between types of desire does not entail a hierarchy of human dignity. All persons bear the image of God; all are equally dependent upon grace; all are equally called to mortification and renewal.<sup>25</sup>

It is essential, however, to clarify the *actual scope* of the present debate. The question at issue is not whether a person who experiences unnatural sinful desire may be saved. Salvation rests upon union with Christ by faith alone and is not contingent upon the particular configuration of one's indwelling corruption. Rather, the question concerns *fitness for ecclesial office*. Ordination is not a right conferred by personal identity or spiritual sincerity but a *privilege entrusted by the church* for the sake of public teaching, moral exemplarity, covenantal stewardship, and representative model of Christ and his Bride (husband of one wife).

Thus, the present argument concerns not degrees of guilt, but *kinds* of moral disorder and their suitability for representative office. Framing the debate in these terms does not create a two tier Christianity but acknowledges the biblical distinction between *membership in Christ* and *entrustment with office*. To collapse these categories is not an act of pastoral mercy but a failure to honor the church's responsibility to guard both truth and vocation.

## IX. Conclusion

This essay has argued that contemporary discussions of unnatural sinful desire suffer from a fundamental moral confusion: the failure to distinguish between *testing* and *temptation*, between desire as neutral experience and *desire as moral phenomenon*, and between *misdirected* and *intrinsically disordered* inclinations. By retrieving the biblical and Reformed category of concupiscence, it has sought to reestablish a moral grammar in which desire itself is subject to theological evaluation, precisely because it arises from a fallen nature rather than from morally indifferent circumstance.

James's account of temptation locates sin's genesis not in external pressure but in the heart's disordered desires, which transform divine testing into temptation. Hebrews' portrayal of Christ's testing confirms this logic by presenting a Savior who was fully tested yet without internal corruption. Romans 1 then provides the essential ontological distinction: some desires distort the use of what is good and creationally ordered, while others are directed toward objects that

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<sup>25</sup> This argument should not be misunderstood as denying the reality of profound sanctification amid ongoing struggle. Many believers battle deep patterns of indwelling sin for years with genuine repentance, faith, and increasing holiness. The church must be patient, compassionate, and discerning in how it shepherds such believers. The present concern is not whether Christians may experience grievous internal conflict and yet belong to Christ, but whether ordained office—which publicly signifies the church's doctrine of creation, holiness, and embodied discipleship—permits an enduring pattern of desire that directly contradicts the creational realities the office is meant to uphold.

Scripture identifies as contrary to nature itself. These distinctions do not function to rank persons by worth or proximity to grace, but to name different kinds of moral disorder with theological precision.

Within this framework, same-sex attraction—as well as other desires whose objects are intrinsically contrary to creational *telos*—cannot be understood merely as morally neutral experiences awaiting behavioral expression. They represent an inclination whose object is incompatible with the *creational telos of human sexuality* and therefore differs in kind from creationally ordered heterosexual desire *misdirected or abused* by lust. To obscure this distinction, however well intentioned, risks departing from the moral categories Scripture itself employs.

No single paper can anticipate every pastoral complexity or every circumstance facing church courts. Prudence, careful shepherding, and charitable discernment remain essential. Yet complexity must not become an excuse for abandoning the moral categories Scripture provides. Thus, this essay has sought to engage this topic exegetically, intentionally distinguished between questions of salvation and questions of ecclesial office. The presence of indwelling sin—including deeply rooted and involuntary disordered desires—does not exclude a person from union with Christ. The gospel addresses sinners precisely as sinners. Ordination, however, concerns not merely personal piety or sincerity of faith, but *public vocation, moral exemplarity, and representational fidelity* to the church's doctrine of creation, redemption, and holiness. Scripture itself distinguishes sharply between salvation and suitability for office, warning that one may belong to Christ and yet be disqualified for ministry (1 Corinthians 9:27; James 3:1). It is therefore a *privilege* entrusted by the church (also by grace alone!), not an *entitlement* derived from personal experience or felt call.

The stakes in this discussion are not as minimal as some would argue. The church's moral clarity on these questions directly affects how pastors disciple the tempted, how elders counsel the struggling, how parents teach their children, and how congregations understand holiness. Confused categories at the level of ordination inevitably produce confusion at the level of discipleship. Clarity in office is therefore not opposed to pastoral care; it is one of its necessary conditions. The purity of the church produces the peace of the church. The issue is not one of fear or isolation. Rather, it is about preserving both pastoral tenderness and theological clarity as the EPC considers what ordination publicly signifies.

As such, any ecclesial evaluation of ordination must reckon honestly with these theological distinctions. If the Church is to remain faithful to Scripture's moral vision for officers, it must resist both the flattening of all desires into moral equivalence and the reduction of office to personal identity. The task before the Church is not to resolve every pastoral complexity by abstraction, but to recover the moral clarity necessary for faithful discernment—clarity rooted not in modern categories of identity, but in the biblical logic of desire, nature, and holiness.

*“It may seem absurd to some that all desires by which man is by nature affected are so completely condemned—although they have been bestowed by God himself, the author of nature.*

*To this I reply that we do not condemn those inclinations which God so engraved upon the character of man at his first creation, that they were eradicable only with humanity itself, but only those bold and unbridled impulses which contend against God’s control.”*

—John Calvin, *Institutes* III.3.12

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