

Working with Evangelical Christian Clients Who Have Unwanted Same-Sex Attractions

Julie H. Hamilton¹

Independent Practice, Boca Raton and Palm Beach Gardens, Florida

Philip J. Henry²

Palm Beach Atlantic University

Most evangelical Christians with same-sex attractions find their sexual attractions to be in conflict with their deeply held religious beliefs. For many of these individuals, it is more important to live consistently with their Christian beliefs, which for them results in peace with God, than to indulge their sexual attractions. Therefore, they are often motivated to seek help, including therapeutic help, for dealing with their unwanted same-sex attractions. Therapists who work with these clients are most effective when they understand their clients' religious beliefs. Therapists can also utilize those beliefs and spiritual resources in the therapy process. In this article, evangelical Christian beliefs are presented and spiritual resources are explained. In addition, the strengths and challenges of Christian clients are described. Finally, spiritually sensitive clinical interventions are provided, as are unique aspects of working with evangelical Christian clients.

Keywords: psychotherapy; evangelical Christians; unwanted same-sex attractions

¹ Julie Harren Hamilton, Ph.D. is a licensed marriage and family therapist in private practice in South Florida. Dr. Hamilton is a former president of the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality and co-editor, along with Dr. Phil Henry, of *The Handbook of Therapy for Unwanted Homosexual Attractions: A Guide to Treatment*. Dr. Hamilton educates on the topics of homosexual development, gender identity, prevention of gender identity confusion, and related issues. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Julie Hamilton, P.O. Box 1382, West Palm Beach, Florida 33402. E-mail: julie@drjuliehamilton.com

² Philip J. Henry, Ph.D. is a Professor of Counseling at Palm Beach Atlantic University in West Palm Beach, Florida. He is a member of the American Counseling Association and the Florida Counseling Association and has presented at the local, state, and national level. He taught in counseling programs at several schools including Temple University, Chestnut Hill College, Eastern University, and Cairn University. In addition, he supervises registered interns in mental health counseling to fulfill their hours for certification in the state of Florida. He has experience in the field of counseling in a wide variety of settings including counseling, research, training, and supervision of counselors and family therapy at Philadelphia Child Guidance Center.

Working with evangelical Christian clients who have unwanted homosexual attractions can be very exciting work. They are often motivated and committed to making changes in their lives, and they typically have a good perspective on the purpose and meaning of life. Their biblical worldview is a tremendous asset in the counseling process, and it is vitally important for therapists to understand this worldview in order to adequately help their Christian clients. According to the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), evangelical Christians are defined as people who uphold the Bible as God's written Word and ultimate authority for their lives, who recognize Jesus's death on the cross as the payment for sin and only means of salvation, and who share their faith with others. Evangelical Christians "rarely use the term 'evangelical' to describe themselves" (NAE, n.d., para. 3). Therefore, in this paper, the term "Christians" will be used interchangeably with "evangelical Christians" and "evangelicals" to refer to evangelical Christians.

Evangelical Christian Teachings Regarding Same-Sex Attractions and Gay Identity

For evangelical Christians, the Bible, as God's inspired written Word, is the source of truth and the foundation for their lives. Not all clients who identify as Christians adhere to a biblical worldview, and some who identify as Christians may not even fully understand a biblical worldview. Nevertheless, many clients identify as Christians in a very literal sense, both understanding and adhering to a biblical worldview. Hence, it is important for therapists who work with Christian clients to understand this worldview.

Relationship with God

Evangelical Christians believe that according to the Bible, God created the world and was relationally connected to the first humans, Adam and Eve. However, Adam and Eve sinned through disobedience, choosing to follow their desires instead of following God's instructions (Genesis 1–3). Their sin separated them from God, and a sinful nature was passed on to everyone born after them. Yet God loved them so much that He did not want them to be separated from Himself. So He provided a way for sin's punishment to be paid through Jesus's death on the cross and for people to be reconciled back with Him. The Bible says that if anyone believes that Jesus is God's Son and that He died and rose from the dead to pay the punishment for mankind's sin, they can receive this free gift of atonement and forgiveness (Acts 16:31; Romans 10:9–10). Evangelical Christians believe that anyone can become a Christian by confessing their sin to God, by believing that Jesus died to pay the price for that sin, and by personally receiving Jesus's sacrificial death as payment for their sin.

Evangelicals believe that once a person becomes a Christian, he or she is granted forgiveness and is given a new identity as a son or daughter of God (John 1:12). Being a Christian means being a follower of Christ, seeking to walk according to God's will with His power, rather than living according to personal desires or feelings. Christians understand that they still have a propensity towards sin, or living for themselves, but they have the power of God's Holy Spirit to help them live beyond their own feelings and instead live according to God's will and plan (Romans 8:1–17). Christians recognize that even with God's help, as humans, they will continue to sin. However, they also know that every time they sin, they can confess that sin to God, turn from it, and immediately, upon

confession, receive God's forgiveness (1 John 1:9).

God's Plan for Marriage

For the evangelical Christian, the Bible clearly teaches that God created people as either male or female. In fact, in the first account of Creation, only two descriptors are given of humans: that they were made in God's image and that God made them to be male or female (Genesis 1:27). Christians understand that being male or female is a significant part of who they are as God's image-bearers.

The Bible also reveals that God gave instructions for men and women to marry and to produce children to "fill the earth" (Genesis 1:27–28). Evangelicals believe that marriage between a man and a woman and procreation within marriage are a part of God's divine order. Throughout both the Old Testament and New Testament sections of the Bible, written over the course of 1500 years, God's intent for male-female sexual relations (sex only in the context of monogamous, lifelong, heterosexual marriage) and His prohibition on homosexual relationships is clearly revealed (e.g. Leviticus 20:13; Romans 1:26–27; 1 Corinthians 6:9–12). Evangelical Christians understand that homosexual feelings are not a sin, but to act on those feelings, thus disregarding God's instructions, would indeed be sin.

Dealing with Homosexual Attractions

Christians believe that God loves them, that He has a good plan for their lives, that they are predisposed to walk in sin, following their own desires rather than God's plan, but that God gives them His Holy Spirit to equip them to live according to His plan, denying their own desires rather than indulging in them. Christians also believe that following and obeying God brings peace; whereas, following their own desires brings

destruction (Romans 8:1–17). Therefore, evangelical Christians seek God's help in surrendering any desires that would lead them away from the plan God has for them. Instead of living for themselves, they seek closeness with the Lord and obedience to Him, which they believe brings ultimate fulfillment.

Additionally, when people become Christian, their identity changes. The Bible says that a person is a new creation—taking on a whole new identity as a child of God (2 Corinthians 5:17; Romans 8:14). Therefore, Christians do not find their identity in their sexual attractions, they find their identity in Christ. So, to summarize, Christians believe that their identity is changed upon becoming a Christian, that attractions are not a sin, but behavior that is not in line with God's instructions is a sin, and that living in obedience to God is far greater than living for oneself.

When Christian clients seek therapy for unwanted homosexual attractions, they are often seeking help for changing their identity, their behaviors, and/or their attractions, to whatever extent change of attractions may be possible. Identity and behaviors are clearly changeable. Additionally, while therapists cannot make someone's attractions change, the research reveals that attractions can and do change to varying degrees among individuals with same-sex attractions (Phelan, Whitehead, & Sutton, 2009). As therapists address underlying issues, attractions may change.

Faith-Related Strengths of Evangelical Christian Clients

Researchers have found that client factors make the biggest difference in therapy. Client factors include the strengths, worldview, and resources that clients bring to the therapy session. These factors are even more

significant than the therapist's theories or techniques (Duncan, Miller, & Sparks, 2004). Therefore, exploring clients' perspectives and utilizing their worldview and resources in therapy can be quite helpful to the therapeutic process.

Christian Worldview

Christian clients bring much to the therapy process, including a worldview that is both hopeful and practical. These clients emphasize the relationship they have with God. Evangelical Christians believe those who truly pursue a close, personal relationship with God find that God is more loving and caring than any earthly father and closer than a best friend. They find that God is One who can meet all of their needs and even bring healing to emotional pain. In fact, the personal relationship they have with God and the beliefs they hold about God have proven to be a tremendous asset when dealing with difficulties (Harren, 1999).

Beliefs about God that have been helpful to Christians in times of difficulty include beliefs about God's character (that God is loving, God is good, God is trustworthy, and God is all-knowing); beliefs about God's sovereignty (that God is in control, and He has a plan); beliefs about God's purpose (that God is working for good for the one in distress and working for good for others); and beliefs about the way to live (that they should live a life surrendered to God) (Harren, 1999).

Taking time to ask clients about their beliefs can be very beneficial to the therapy process. Sometimes when clients are hurting, their pain overshadows their deeply held beliefs. Exploration by the therapist can help clients to recall those beliefs that are helpful and transformative. The process of reconnecting to transformative beliefs can be therapeutic in itself.

Christian Resources

In addition to exploring beliefs with clients, asking clients about their resources can be helpful. Christians possess a number of resources that aid in dealing with difficulty and can therefore be a supplement to the therapy process. As therapists explore the faith-related resources that are important to Christian clients, they help their clients to recall and reconnect with resources that have been overshadowed by the problems that bring them to therapy.

Practical resources that have been identified by Christian clients are prayer, the Bible, Christian books, Christian music, church, ministry opportunities, pastoral support, family, friends, and the prayers of others. These clients also describe spiritual resources related to their relationship with God, such as sensing God's presence, God's peace, God's strength, God's provisions, and God's Holy Spirit (Harren, 1999). When working with Christian clients, therapists can ask their clients specifically what resources have been helpful to them in the past and, by doing so, point them back to those resources that have worked but have since been forgotten. Additionally, therapists can ask what resources are currently most helpful—what aides them in their pursuit of change. Knowing and utilizing what works for clients is key to helping them continue to move towards their goals.

Long-term Viewpoint

Another faith-related strength for Christian clients is their understanding of the importance of sacrifice and their willingness to delay temporary gratification for long-term gain. Such Christians who pursue change of homosexual identity, behavior, or even attractions, often consider that temporary struggles in exchange for accomplishing a greater goal is far better than temporary comfort. Evangelical Christians often have the long-term view, even an eternal

perspective, in mind. Many Christians live by the words of Jesus, “. . . If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me” (Luke 9:23 NKJ). They understand that following Christ involves sacrifice, but they also recognize that the benefits far outweigh the cost.

Faith-Related Challenges for Evangelical Christian Clients—Holding Unbiblical Views

A challenge for some Christian clients is their lack of familiarity with the Bible. Clients who are not familiar with Scripture might have a distorted understanding of what it means to be a Christian, how Christians deal with difficulties, including unwanted sexual desires, and how to live a victorious Christian life.

Unbiblical Views of God

Some Christian clients have views of God that are not biblical and are therefore inconsistent with their Christian worldview. For example, they may believe that God is harsh or critical or always mad at them. These clients tend to have excessive, unhealthy guilt and difficulty comprehending unconditional love and forgiveness. This misperception hurts not only their relationship with God but can also affect their view of themselves and their relationships with others. Misperceptions vary, but in most cases misperceptions of God or the Bible will present challenges for Christian clients as they navigate difficult issues.

Unbiblical Views of Dealing with Homosexuality

When it comes to dealing with the issue of unwanted homosexual attractions, Christian clients who are not familiar with the Bible might have ideas that are counterproductive. In fact, there are several

myths for Christians regarding unwanted homosexual attractions that are neither biblical nor helpful.

One myth is the idea that through prayer, God is going to take homosexual feelings away, and if He does not take the feelings away, then prayer failed or God failed. Assuming God should remove unwanted feelings can result in bitterness because most of the time this is not the way God works. Evangelicals believe that God is capable of miracles, and many people can testify to miracles that God has performed in their lives. And yet, when there are underlying issues that need to be resolved, God does not typically just remove the symptoms; rather, He helps people in dealing with the underlying issues.

Expecting God to remove personal struggles might be based on an underlying assumption that God must work the way we want Him to. However, this is not biblical. For evangelical Christians, according to the Bible, believers are to pray, expressing their needs and desires, and surrendering their requests to God’s will. For example, Jesus’s prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane shortly before He was arrested was, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done” (Luke 22:42 ESV). Christians understand that God’s will is far better than their own plans, so when they pray, they also surrender to God’s plan. God is ultimately in control. Psalm 115:3 says, “Our God is in heaven and He does whatever pleases Him” (NIV).

A more biblical viewpoint and one that many evangelical Christians with unwanted attractions can relate to is the example of the Apostle Paul. He prayed for God to take away something that bothered him, and God denied his request, reminding Paul that God’s grace was enough and that God’s power is perfected through human weakness. Paul’s dependence on God in the face of that ailment

was more important than the removal of the ailment (2 Corinthians 12:9). Many Christian clients with unwanted attractions can relate to and are encouraged by Paul's experience.

Another myth is that change should be easy. The thought might be *God wants it for me, and I want it, so it should be easy*. Yet, this way of thinking does not apply in any other phase of life. Consider a woman who wants to be a competitive runner. She must make hard choices. She must strive and push herself beyond her limits—running, working out, eating right, and focusing on her goal. She knows that there is a correlation between diligent training and achievement. Sowing and reaping are a part of what God has built into the universe and most of the things that are worthwhile in life require hard work. Growth in marriage, raising children, progress in a career, and contending with uncertainties of life all require continual effort and perseverance. Galatians 6:7 echoes this note, “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever one sows, that he will also reap” (ESV).

Another myth is that change should be without risk. In fact, opponents of change-allowing therapy try to make the case that pursuing change of homosexual identity, behavior, or attractions is dangerous and risky and should not be an option. Even some Christians have been influenced by this idea. But from an evangelical perspective, this line of thinking is neither realistic, nor is it biblical. All change demands risk and sacrifice. Often, the more a person wants to gain, the more that person must be willing to sacrifice, and the greater risk that person must take. As mentioned previously, Jesus described the necessity of being willing to sacrifice in order to follow Him. In this same talk, He addressed risk, emphasizing the importance of first considering the cost. He gave the illustration of a king going out to war or a man building a tower. In both cases the risk is evident, and He suggested that

people should consider the cost of doing something before they set out to do it (Luke 14:26–33). In therapy, this is where informed consent is important, explaining to clients that pursuing any type of change can be hard. When clients enter therapy for any issue, whether depression, anxiety, marital problems, substance abuse, or unwanted sexual attractions, they may feel worse before they feel better.

Making changes in life is rarely a risk-free proposition. Consider a man who wants to overcome physical addiction to alcohol. He must initially go through a detoxification process, during which time he is at risk for seizures and other medical complications, which is why medical professionals assist in this process. Should he not pursue change because it involves a risk? Of course not—the goal makes it well worth the risk. Risk is inherent in the change process, as is the sacrifice. If he wants to embrace sobriety, he must say yes to change, and he must say no to that which would hold him back. He makes these choices not just once but rather, as Marsha Linehan (2014) suggests, over and over. He must also learn new habits emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. It is time and labor intensive and is a sacrifice that is both hard and risky. He must wrestle with inner temptations, and while doing all of this he believes that what he is risking and sacrificing is well worth it.

Another myth is that negative feelings are unacceptable. Some Christians mistakenly think that it is wrong to feel painful emotions. They know that the Bible speaks of rejoicing in all things, so they falsely assume this means they should not acknowledge any negative emotions. However, it is possible to acknowledge pain, grieve one's losses, and still ultimately rejoice. King David demonstrated this balance of emotions throughout the book of Psalms, where he expressed his pain to God, but he also praised God for being with him in pain and always

delivering him. The Bible also says there is “. . . a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance . . .” (Ecclesiastes 3:4 ESV). Feeling, acknowledging, and expressing emotions is very important and is certainly consistent with a Christian worldview.

Spiritually Sensitive Clinical Interventions for Evangelical Christian Clients

Many mainstream approaches to therapy are effective in working with evangelical Christian clients who have unwanted homosexual attractions. These include EMDR, interpersonal therapy, psychodynamic therapies, and others (Hamilton & Henry, 2009). When applying mainstream approaches with Christian clients, it is important to consider their Christian beliefs in order to avoid contradicting their belief system. For example, an approach to therapy that emphasizes the goodness of the client apart from God would be contradictory to an evangelical Christian worldview. On the other hand, an approach that emphasizes the dignity and worth of a client made in God's image and redeemed and restored by God would be consistent with an evangelical Christian worldview. Likewise, a therapist who emphasizes the importance of self-reliance instead of reliance on God, or a therapist who emphasizes self-focus that excludes a focus on the relationship with God, would be working inconsistently with a Christian client's belief system.

Hence, familiarity with a Christian worldview is not only helpful, but also important in working with these clients. With that said, some mainstream approaches can be very effective. Here are some approaches and interventions that can be both helpful and consistent with a Christian worldview.

Enhancing Motivation

The motivation level of the client is an important factor. Motivational enhancement therapy suggests that one of the barriers that keeps people from moving forward is that they do not think that they can accomplish what they want to (Miller, 2012). This lack of confidence is destructive. Clients pursuing help for unwanted homosexual attractions not only have to battle their own doubts but also battle against popular cultural messages that change is not possible. Therapists can address clients' doubts by combatting cultural ideas with facts. Many people have experienced change in identity, behavior, and even attractions (Phelan, Whitehead, & Sutton, 2009). Not everyone experiences change in attractions, but varying degrees of change are possible for some people. Further, Scripture confirms the possibility of change in our lives. Jesus stated “. . . with God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26 ESV). As stated previously, informed consent addresses risks and challenges and helps to set the stage for realistic expectations for therapy. Presenting both the possibility for varying degrees of change and risks is important.

Encouraging Honest Expression

For some evangelical Christian clients, one of the first steps is to honestly acknowledge their homosexual attractions and behaviors. These clients may have deep shame about homosexual attractions that they were not only *not* born with but also that they did not choose to feel. Some Christian clients may find it difficult to open up about their unwanted feelings, some having never disclosed these desires prior to therapy. These clients may also be secretly embracing a gay identity and/or engaging in homosexual behaviors that are leaving them feeling remorseful and possibly embarrassed. Such clients may need help admitting their feelings and behaviors to a non-judgmental, compassionate therapist who also respects

the biblical conviction that leads the client to have regret. Most therapists are trained to be empathetic and compassionate and would never want to be judgmental or condemning towards a client. This non-judgmental, compassionate approach makes it easier for clients to open up about deeply embarrassing issues. While most therapists are naturally accepting and compassionate, at the same time, a therapist who condones homosexual behavior will be acting contradictory to an evangelical Christian client's worldview. Therefore, a therapist who works with these clients must be able to balance acceptance, empathy, and understanding with a recognition of the Christian client's worldview that homosexual behaviors are outside of God's plan. Giving clients the space to open up about their secret struggles and validating their perspective is very important. Openness and honesty are important initial steps. Honesty about feelings (which are not a sin) and also about behaviors (which are sinful) is consistent with an evangelical Christian worldview, in that the Bible says, "Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being. . ." (Psalm 51:6 ESV) and ". . . confess your sins to one another . . ." (James 5:16 ESV).

Addressing Root Causes

Early childhood traumas, such as sexual abuse or points of emotional wounding, may be at the heart of some clients' same-sex attractions (Frisch & Hviid, 2006; Moberly, 1983/2006; Mustanski, Kuper, & Geene, 2014). Trauma is connected to survival, and the things learned in those circumstances can become hard-wired into the deepest part of a person's brain and soul. For clients whose same-sex attractions are rooted in trauma, trauma-based approaches such as EMDR (Shapiro, 2017) can be helpful, as can psychodynamic approaches. Short-term psychodynamic therapies are helpful because they examine emotions and motivations.

Dealing with the roots of emotional issues in therapy is very important. Deep hurts should not be ignored or glossed over. Christians recognize God's loving concern for life's deepest hurts, and His ability to bring healing. The Bible declares, "He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds" (Psalm 147:3 ESV). Christian clients realize that their therapists can be used by God to facilitate healing of old wounds.

Attending to Thoughts and Behaviors

In addition to addressing root causes from the past, it is also beneficial to address present patterns of thinking and acting. Mainstream approaches that are used to treat any number of life-dominating issues can often be used with evangelical Christian clients who have unwanted homosexual attractions. Therapies like dialectical behavioral therapy (Linehan, 2014) can be helpful because they are skill-based and involve emotional regulation, distress tolerance, and emotional effectiveness.

Cognitive therapy can also be helpful (cf. Leahy, 2017). Thoughts are very powerful, but thoughts can also be inaccurate. Inaccurate thoughts can become deeply held false beliefs about oneself or others that impact a person in a profound way. Therefore, it is important to be able to identify false beliefs and replace those beliefs with the truth. It is not just a matter of trying to let go of false beliefs but of actually replacing them with truth. For the Evangelical Christian, the Bible reveals the idea of not just avoiding wrong acting or thinking but replacing it with right acting or thinking. For example, in the Garden of Eden, before telling Adam and Eve that they could not eat of the one certain tree, God first told them about all of the trees that they *were* allowed to eat from. God did not leave them to simply focus on what they were not allowed to do; He gave them an abundance of options that were, in fact, permissible and

wonderful (Genesis 2:16–17). Similarly, when Christian clients are seeking to decrease undesirable behaviors, it is helpful for them to focus on increasing behaviors that are desirable. Likewise, when these clients are seeking to decrease undesirable thoughts, it is helpful for them to increase the desirable thoughts. Desirable thoughts are listed in Philippians 4:8: “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (ESV).

Many Christian clients have wrong ideas about themselves that need to be addressed. For example, a client might believe that he is inadequate as a male. He may not have been affirmed by his father or may have even been belittled by his father. As a result, he believes that he is inadequate and has little value as a man. His early experiences have led him to draw wrong conclusions about himself. In addition to addressing the early wounding, the therapist can help him identify false beliefs in order to replace those with truth. The Bible is an excellent source of truth about human dignity and value. Whether a client feels unloved, unimportant, worthless, or inadequate, the Bible provides the truth to replace those false beliefs. According to the Bible, humans are greatly loved, of great value and worth, and precious to God (1 John 3:1; Matthew 10:29–31; Psalm 139). Helping evangelical clients to see themselves in an accurate light is very important.

Improving Identity

For Christian clients seeking help for unwanted homosexual attractions, identity is relevant in at least two ways. First, some view homosexuality as their primary identity. As stated earlier, evangelical Christians find their identity in Christ. Rather than having an identity that is based in sexual attractions, evangelical Christians believe they should

identify as men and women who are adopted into God’s family and have become God’s own children. Therapists can help such clients to remember this.

Second, some clients are insecure in their identity as a man or woman, an insecurity which may begin in childhood possibly due to early disidentification with members of the same sex (see Moberly, 1983/2006; Udry & Chantala 2005; Francis, 2008). In addition to addressing gender insecurity, it is beneficial to help clients to understand their own strengths and weaknesses. Various tools, such as the Meyers-Briggs, Enneagram, Strength Finder and a myriad of other personality tests can assist clients in discovering their personal talents, abilities, and strengths, as well as their weaknesses. According to the Bible, God has gifted people differently in order to fulfill different purposes (Romans 12:6–8; 1 Corinthians 12:4–31). When evangelical clients have a better understanding of themselves, they can begin to live in ways that are consistent with their strengths, talents, and abilities. For example, this type of insight can lead to changing careers, ending and beginning relationships, moving, pursuing further education, and so forth. When people grow in their understanding of who they are, their sense of confidence can begin to grow, and changes can even occur with regard to unwanted homosexuality. Dealing with root issues, resolving past traumas, changing behavioral responses, correcting faulty thinking, and discovering and living out who one truly is can be empowering and transformative.

Unique Aspects of Therapeutic Work with Evangelical Christian Clients

Beyond therapeutic theories and clinical interventions are the personal experiences of individuals. Many Christian men and women

have found ways of moving beyond their homosexual identities, behaviors, and attractions. Some have helped countless others find ways out of homosexuality. These Christian leaders from within the “ex-gay movement” have shared their insights on what was most helpful in their own journeys many years ago and how they have successfully helped others over the past twenty to forty-plus years (cf. Black, 2017). The firsthand experiences of these leaders provide great insight for therapists working with Christian clients who have unwanted homosexual attractions.

Confession and Forgiveness

Men and women who left homosexuality decades ago, and have since helped countless others, know what it takes to pursue change. One of the factors that many of them describe in Black’s book is the power and importance of confession and forgiveness. Many of these men and women describe repentance as the first step in leaving homosexuality. For example, Frank Worthen, one of the founders of the ex-gay movement, who for over forty years helped people leave homosexuality, had this to say about repentance:

It is my belief that only with the power of God can real change be realized. The first message of Jesus was, “Repent!” This message has largely been set aside by the modern church and deemed unnecessary. Yet it remains the starting gate. Repentance as the starting gate is the call to turn away from all sexual sin and idolatry and turn to Christ in a loving relationship. I am speaking of a genuine repentance that produces a new life of heart-felt sorrow and consecration. Avoid this gate and there will be years of misery and a consistent pattern of up and down victory only to be followed by failure.

This causes many to give up and say, “God didn’t work in my life.” (Black, 2017, pp. 154–155)

Some people misunderstand the concept of repentance as indicating that God is mean and angry. However, just the opposite is true. According to the Bible, it is the kindness of God that leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4). In addition to personal repentance, forgiving others for the wrongs they have done is another important step for Christians. The Bible says that God forgives those who forgive others and does not forgive those who do not forgive others (Matthew 6:15).

Surrender to the Lord

In addition to repentance, Worthen goes on to describe the power of “complete surrender to the lordship of Christ.” He goes on to describe the importance of total dependency on the Lord, seeking His help and His will (Black, 2017, p. 155). Similarly, Anne Paulk, who left a life of lesbianism nearly thirty years ago and currently leads a national network of ministries, said:

. . . men and women who surrender these areas to the lordship of Jesus Christ tend to experience great mercy and kindness from God, who transforms them from wallowing wayfarers to disciples who know their God. . . . Standing without excuses before the cross humbles a person and births new identity as a son or daughter of God. From this place of very real tensile strength, men and women learn how to walk in ways that please their faithful Creator (1 Thess. 4). (Black, 2017, pp.167–168)

Focusing on the Cross

Focusing on the cross of Christ is another factor that leaders within the ex-gay movement agree is powerful. Andy

Comiskey, who has been working with men and women for forty years described this focus on the cross as “. . . a Spirit-inspired revelation of the cross of Jesus Christ, an exhibition of God’s radical self-giving. In love, He called me to follow Him with my own little cross” (Black, 2017, p. 159). Black described similar sentiments when he said, “Only through the meditation of the passion of Jesus Christ and believing upon the finished work of the cross of Christ can we ever hope to really be free!” (Black, 2017, p. 105).

Boundaries

Others who have left homosexuality describe the importance of boundaries or protecting against the people, places, or things that would cause temptation. They recognize the power of old habits and the importance of guarding against that which might ultimately be destructive. Many of them describe giving up negative influences and moving on to build new friendships within loving church communities where they could grow and flourish.

Close Relationship with the Lord

One thing that most of these experts have in common is their emphasis on a close personal relationship with the Lord. David Kyle Foster summed it up when he said, “A healed person has learned one thing so thoroughly that they operate in it without thinking: knowing why helps, but knowing Him heals and is what brings lasting freedom” (Black, 2017, p. 209). For each of the men and women who have moved past their homosexuality and gone on to help others as pastoral counselors or lay counselors, the common factor is the relationship they have with God.

Not all therapists feel equipped or comfortable addressing spiritual issues with clients. Yet, for evangelical Christian clients, their faith is often the motivation for seeking

change and also the greatest asset they have in the change process. Therapists who are not comfortable addressing spiritual issues can start by simply exploring the evangelical client’s perspective on spiritual steps that might be helpful. Asking clients about their own beliefs does not require the therapist to be an expert in that particular belief system. The therapist merely adopts a stance of curiosity, asking the client about their beliefs and what steps the client thinks would be important according to his or her own belief system. This client-directed approach is an approach that therapists of any faith or no faith can take with evangelical Christian clients. In addition, therapists can refer these clients back to working with their pastor or leaders within their church to address issues of spiritual growth.

Referring or Consulting with Christian Clergy

Therapists who are not equipped to address spiritual issues may consider consulting with their clients’ pastor or referring such clients to talk further with their pastor or church leaders. In addition, therapists can ask about programs that are offered by the client’s church. Many churches have small groups or Bible studies and even groups dedicated to specific topics, such as Living Waters, which addresses sexual and relational issues. Evangelical clients often find such resources within their own church to be an important supplement to the therapy process. Likewise, there are Christian ministries outside of the church that can be helpful as well. Ministries, such as those found within Restored Hope Network, offer conferences, teachings, support groups, discipleship, and mentoring. For years, such ministries have assisted men and women in leaving homosexuality and have made a significant difference in the lives of countless people. Therapists can point

clients towards those types of resources in order to aid in the change process.

Conclusion

Evangelical Christian clients are a delightful population to work with, as they have beliefs and resources that greatly contribute to the therapeutic process. Such clients with unwanted homosexual attractions are often highly motivated and willing to take the steps necessary to accomplish their goals. They recognize that God's plan for their lives is better than their own, and they seek to align themselves with His plan. They find deep fulfillment in living for God. When therapists recognize the importance of a Christian worldview and allow their Christian clients to bring their Christianity into the therapy process, the therapeutic process is greatly enhanced.

References

- Black, S. H. (2017). *Freedom Realized: Finding Freedom from Homosexuality and Living a Life Free from Labels*. Enumclaw, WA: Redemption Press.
- Duncan, B. L., Miller, S. D., Sparks, J. A. (2004). *The Heroic Client: A Revolutionary Way to Improve Effectiveness Through Client-Directed, Outcome-Informed Therapy*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Francis, A. M. (2008). Family and sexual orientation: The family-demographic correlates of homosexuality in men and women. *Journal of Sex Research*, 45(4), 371–377.
- Frisch, M. and Hviid, A. (2006). Childhood family correlates of heterosexual and homosexual marriages: A national cohort study of two million Danes. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 35:533–547.
- Hamilton, J. H. & Henry, P. J. (2009). *Handbook of Therapy for Unwanted Homosexual Attractions: A Guide to Treatment*. Orlando, FL: Xulon Press.
- Harren, J. C. (1999). *Religious Faith as an Asset During Times of Crisis: A Qualitative Study*. (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation). Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, Florida.
- Leahy, R. (2017). *Cognitive Therapy Techniques, Second Edition: A Practitioner's Guide*. NY: Guilford Press.
- Linehan, M. (2014). *DBT Skills Training Manual*. NY: Guilford Press.
- Miller, W. (2012). *Motivational Interviewing: Helping People Change, Third Edition*. NY: Guilford Press.
- Moberly, E. R. (2006). *Homosexuality: A New Christian Ethic*. Cambridge: Lutterworth Press. (Original work published 1983).
- Mustanski, B., Kuper, L., and Geene, G. (2014). Development of sexual orientation and identity. In Tolman, D., & Diamond, L., Co-Editors-in-Chief, *APA Handbook of Sexuality and Psychology*, Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association, 1:609.
- National Association of Evangelicals. (n.d.). What is an Evangelical? Retrieved June 24, 2019, from <https://www.nae.net/what-is-an-evangelical/>
- Phelan, J. E., Whitehead, N. & Sutton, P. M. (2009). What research shows: NARTH's response to the APA claims on homosexuality *Journal of Human Sexuality*, 1, 1–94.
- Shapiro, F. (2017). *Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) Therapy, Third Edition: Basic*

Principles, Protocols and Procedures.
NY: Guilford Press.

Udry, J. R., & Chantala, K. (2005). Risk factors differ according to same-sex and opposite-sex interest. *Journal of Biosocial Science*, 37, 481–497.