

INTERVIEW

Interview with Christopher Yuan

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PETER LILLBACK: *It is a privilege to interview Christopher Yuan, whose concern is to address sexual ethics and Christian witness in light of biblical theology. He has written Holy Sexuality and the Gospel: Sex, Desire, and Relationship Shaped by God's Grand Story.¹ Let us begin with a word of prayer:*

Father, thank you for your providential care that has allowed us to meet together. We pray that this interview might be uplifting to those that read it. We pray, Lord, that you will bless our friend Christopher as he shares his wrestling with your Word in his personal experiences and that he will continue to have a fruitful ministry that advances your kingdom. Thank you, Lord, that we can commit ourselves to you afresh and be reminded that the gospel is the hope of every human being, regardless of who we are or what we have done. Thank you for the greatness of your forgiveness and the amazing grace that is our hope. Amen.

Christopher, you are a graduate of and teach at Moody Bible Institute. Tell us a little about your theological preparation to be a teacher and a writer.

CHRISTOPHER YUAN: I was not raised in a Christian home. I did not have any theological background growing up in Chicago, but I wrestled with my

¹ Christopher Yuan, *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel: Sex, Desire, and Relationships Shaped by God's Grand Story*, foreword by Rosaria Butterfield (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2018).

sexual identity from a young age and “came out” when I was in my 20s. Through that crisis, my mother and father came to faith. We talk about that in a memoir I co-authored with my mom, *Out of a Far Country: A Gay Son’s Journey to God, A Broken Mother’s Search for Hope*. Through my parents’ faith and newfound witness, they began to reflect Christ to me although I was running from God. I was pursuing my doctorate in dentistry in Louisville, Kentucky. I got involved in partying and drugs and was expelled from dental school three months before I was to receive my doctorate. I moved to Atlanta and kept doing what I knew how to do best, which was selling drugs, and finally was arrested by the federal government. I was facing ten years to life, and while I was in jail, God began miraculously and graciously drawing me to himself. I found a Bible in the trashcan and started reading it. All my friends had left me, and my parents were the only ones who were there for me. It was really interesting, because we get these narratives from the world saying that Christian parents reject or do not love their gay children. I had the exact opposite experience. Before they came to faith, my parents could not accept it when I came out as gay. It was only after they became Christians that they realized they needed to love me as God loved them.

PL: *Would you say that you heard the gospel for the first time clearly from your parents? Or was it reading the Bible from the trashcan?*

CY: Before I became a Christian, no one ever shared the gospel with me, although I had some Christian friends. It was not my parents either, because they knew how antagonistic I was to anything to do with religion or God. I thought, “That’s fine for you, but don’t push it on me.” They had to live the gospel before they had any chance to preach it. Their quiet testimony, not any individual, ministry, or evangelistic system, led me to pick up that Bible. It was simply God’s Word.

PL: *Are you comfortable with the phrase “sovereign grace”? That God somehow decided to call you to himself?*

CY: One hundred percent. I look at my life and my mother’s conversion, and it is the only explanation. She hated Christians and wanted nothing to do with God. God had to miraculously invade her life, tear it apart with my coming out; at the same time, my parents’ marriage was a disaster, and they were about to divorce. It was only sovereign grace that wooed us.

PL: *As you were facing potential prison time, what happened as the Lord started to move in your heart?*

CY: Finding a Bible in the trashcan—how can that be anything other than

God's irresistible grace? With nothing better to do, I began reading God's Word, and initially, it was not good news. I was convicted as a sinner, rebellious against God, my parents, society—and that was without touching the issue of sexuality! Then I got some really bad news. I found out I was HIV positive. That was the nail in the coffin, the lowest of lows. After that, God never left me. One night in my prison cell, I saw someone had scribbled something on the metal bunk above, and it said, "If you're bored, read Jeremiah 29:11": "I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans to prosper you, not to harm you, to give you a future and a hope." I honestly had no clue what it meant, but God gave me just enough faith to get through that one day and the next.

As I studied God's Word, one of the things that was transformative was that God had to change my wrong thinking about identity before I could realize that same sex relationships were sinful. It is one of the first chapters of my book, and one of the core aspects that Christians are missing in conversation with the gay community. If one believes being gay is a matter of who one is, sinful behavior is inseparable from who one is. I needed to be radically enlightened with God's truth: sexuality is not *who* you are but *how* you are. That was revolutionary. Once I was able to grasp that "I am gay" is a wrong statement, I was able to move forward. In prison, I realized that we pigeonhole ourselves into a framework of heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, categories that are insufficient to articulate God's calling of sexuality. I read through God's Word and realized that God has called us in two ways: chastity in singleness and faithfulness in marriage. I coined the term *holy sexuality* to represent that. God called me to full-time ministry while I was in prison. I got out of prison, applied to Moody, then went to Wheaton to get an MA. I was invited to teach at Moody soon after I graduated from Wheaton in 2007, and I finished a DMin in 2014.

PL: *As you look at the whole experience of your life—you were without Christ growing up in the United States—are you from an ethnic family?*

CY: My parents were born in China before it was Communist China. They were among the fortunate ones to flee to Taiwan; they were raised and met in college there before coming to the United States for graduate school. My mother just wanted to get married. So she gave up her full-ride scholarship and supported my dad through school. I am a cross-cultural kid, born in America, but I am not American, some people will say. I am Chinese, but I am not Chinese. I am sort of this in-between, culturally more American but ethnically Chinese. I can speak Mandarin, and that is my heart language and my ethnic background.

PL: *So in your formative years, one influence on your life was the immigrant status, that Asian educational work ethic. You are also in America with all the opportunities and dangers and temptations it brings. Where did the interest in the gay movement come in?*

CY: I would say same-sex attractions. They developed early on, as I was exposed to pornography very young. No one should ever be exposed to pornography at any age, but nine is very young. Unfortunately, that has become the norm with it being so easily accessible and free on the Internet.

PL: *Was it an internet source where it happened for you?*

CY: No, it was in 1979, when I was nine, before the Internet. It was surprisingly at a trusted family friend's home. He had hidden it. Being a nosy kid, you unfortunately find stuff you are not supposed to and are awakened to things that are not supposed to be awoken. You often will hear that same-sex attraction stems from issues in our past: our parents, an absentee father, or dominant mother. However, a good theological anthropology needs a proper doctrine of sin. In Adam we all died (cf. 1 Cor 15:22) and our nature has been corrupted, perverted from birth, and that is the only primary root cause. Other factors do come into play, not so much as causative agents but as catalysts.

PL: *Would you say then that because we all have a broken and fallen nature, same-sex attraction is a universal possibility, rather than something that you are born to or that circumstances force you to be? We all have the potential just because we are in a state of rebellion to God? Or is that too strong?*

CY: The sinful nature is universal, although it may be differently expressed in different people. It is a predisposition, not as a predetermination. A person might be born with a predisposition toward alcoholism, gossiping, even a heterosexual lust problem, pornography, or same-sex attraction. The universal aspect comes from original sin, expressed differently in different people; but the core is still the sinful nature, which points right to the only core answer, Jesus Christ. This is why in my book I talk about God's grand story—creation, fall, redemption, and consummation—a broad framework for understanding sexuality.

PL: *How when you were a young person did the attraction to the drug scene come, and was that simultaneous or different from same-sex attraction? Did they just happen to mesh in your experience?*

CY: I was a really good kid growing up; my older brother was the rebellious one. He knew how to push my parents' buttons. He excelled in everything.

I was an average, nice kid. In my early 20s, when I moved to Louisville, I felt, “This is who I am.” I did not see it as rebellion. There is a lot of bad logic in that, but it seemed logical to me at the time. I felt that I was the victim. I got involved in drugs because I was thinking postmodern, deconstructionist: If I had been taught to believe that same-sex relationships are wrong but they are not, then maybe all the other things I thought were wrong really were not. So who says doing drugs is wrong? The whole secular morality framework says as long as I am not hurting anyone, it is my choice, and we justify it. When you give in on one issue, you give in on another. That might have been my thought process.

PL: *What has given you the freedom to talk and write so openly about this? Is it therapeutic, or redemptive? Is it a mission God has given you? Why is it so vital for you to share?*

CY: Growing up, I kept the most significant thing about me secret for so long. When I came out, I thought, “I have been keeping this down for so long, I am going to tell everyone.” That might be why our gay friends appear to be throwing it in our faces. If you have had to hold something down for decades, you feel, “I can finally not have to hold it down” and want to tell everyone. So I was transparent to the point of being obnoxious. One of those Christians would say, “Why are you throwing your gayness, your same sex relationship, in my face?” Also, Asians do not share. It is not natural for us to be transparent. Chinese do not want to lose face; there is that shame base. When I first came out, we decided that we were not going to hide it but be open and not ashamed. God has so blessed my dad, my mom, and me in being faithful to witness about the glory of God and the power of his grace.

PL: *Your story gives you the ability to speak theologically in a unique way because these are truths that you have had to learn to live and apply. Some say that if you have a same-sex attraction, you cannot be a Christian. How do you respond from a theological perspective?*

CY: We need to be consistent. How does one come to faith? It is by grace through faith in Christ, and these are core doctrines. But what does it look like to be a Christian? Can a Christian still be tempted? The answer is obviously yes. The way Paul writes in Romans 7, “I do what I do not want” (v. 1), describes a real struggle between the flesh and the Spirit. The idea that a person who has the Holy Spirit abiding in them cannot be tempted by same-sex attractions does not line up with Scripture’s understanding of original sin, indwelling sin, and actual sin. The confusion comes from the term “same-sex attraction.” In my book, I indicated that “same-sex

attraction” is not clear enough and decided not to use it when talking about God’s sexual ethic. Rather, I chose to use the biblical terms “temptation” and “desire.” Rewording your question: Can a person be tempted with sin and still be a Christian? I would say yes, Jesus Christ himself was tempted “in every respect,” the writer of Hebrews says, but was “without sin” (Heb 4:15). The critical question is whether an individual is in unrepentant serial sin. I would define same-sex desire as sin and same-sex behavior as sin. Then the question we need to ask is, Is that person truly redeemed, converted, or not? If the Holy Spirit is abiding in them, they should not be in bondage to sin, or if they are, the Holy Spirit should be convicting them of sin.

PL: *Is homosexuality the unforgivable sin? If you have been involved in a same-sex relationship, is there no forgiveness? How does the gospel address this?*

CY: Yes, that is an excellent question although the majority of Christians answer no. But we need to ask ourselves, have our actions at times wrongly communicated that we actually do view homosexuality as the unforgivable sin? We only know one instance in the New Testament that has been clearly identified as being the unforgivable sin, and that is grieving the Holy Spirit (Matt 12:31–32 and parallels). So all other sins can be covered by the blood of Christ, including mass murder, as committed by Paul, prostitution, or adultery. These sins indeed can be forgiven, and so even same-sex relationships or multiple-same-sex relationships can be covered by the blood of Christ.

PL: *Those struggling to become new persons by identity with Christ feel the temptation and desire and sometimes succumb. How do you counsel them from a Christian perspective, desiring “holy sexuality” and recognizing that Christians are not always holy?*

CY: Those wrestling with same-sex attraction often feel the stigma of being “the worst of sinners.” Paul calls himself that but then argues, “For this reason, I received mercy so that others would come to know him” (cf. 1 Tim 1:16). I want people to realize that they are not much different from everyone struggling with sin. It might be a different sin, but it is still a sin struggle. The goal is not the eradication of temptation; that is not biblical or realistic. Sanctification is instantaneous, progressive, and future, not a one-time done deal and you are never tempted anymore. I notice in myself that the more I fixate on my sin temptation and struggle, on simply not sinning, it can become overwhelming, and I miss out on Christ. Our goal is daily intimacy and union with Christ, and to apply it to sexual identity and same-sex attraction. However, if you focus on union with Christ and how to grow in spiritual depth

and intimacy with Christ, exercising the habits of grace, you will not only be able to receive Christ but also to have victory over the bondage of sin.

PL: *How does a person learn to see themselves not as a sinner, or a person with a history of a gay or pornographic lifestyle, but as someone who can say, "That's maybe what I've done but that's not who I am"?*

CY: Identity in Christ is correlated with union with Christ. I still live in the vestiges of my former identity and the body memories and its consequences. Thus, I daily need to mortify sin, but my identity is not in my indwelling sin. Identity in the personhood of Christ has priority. Our identity in Christ restores that image of God distorted by the fall and guides us every day, moment, and our every thought. We talk about what is normal or abnormal, and honestly, what is normal and easy is to go on autopilot and let your flesh go its way. What is abnormal is to die to self, mortify the sin nature and indwelling sin, and surrender to Christ. That is the difficult path to take. God has called us to do that and, more importantly, has given us the Holy Spirit who empowers us and undergirds our sanctification.

PL: *In the gay community and beyond one argument is "I am born this way, this is my nature, I cannot change. There is no way of being other than who I am, and I need to accept it." This is the world's perspective against the idea that I can define myself in a new way in Christ. How do you look at your fellow gay friends and say, "No, I can be different"? How do you engage their arguments?*

CY: The secular approach does not look to the Word of God as the foundation for truth. Their epistemology is what they call facts and science. However, scientifically there is nothing conclusive to date to say that people are born gay, although there is good evidence saying that being gay is multifaceted. Being gay could have a genetic or hormonal factor, but it could also have developmental or sociological factors. We do not know, so we need to begin with a theological anthropology. We are created in the image of God (Gen 1:27), but that image has since been distorted. Although the majority think that people are born gay, the Lord Jesus Christ said in John 3 that you must be born again to be a new creation in Christ. People say, "I was born a (you fill in the blank)," but Jesus Christ told Nicodemus, "You must be born again" (John 3:7).

PL: *How does knowing the history of redemption help someone who is engaging the issues of a gay lifestyle? How do you tell that story in a way that speaks to their lives?*

CY: God created us in the image of God, and it is imperative to start there

to address the gender identity issue. And what does the image of God mean? As we look at Genesis 1:27, there are three lines of parallel poetry: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” There is a direct correlation between the image of God and male and female. “Male” and “female” is not a biological or psychological reality; it is a spiritual reality, essential to who we are as God’s good image with value and dignity before God. The fall has distorted us; this reality points to the need for the redeemer who came to restore humanity. Understanding the need for Christ helps to see that same-sex sexual desires, same-sex behavior, and same-sex romantic desires are sinful. Then, if that is the problem, the sole solution is Christ. An anthropocentric answer has been the solution sought over the past few years. Focusing on support groups and a psychoanalytical approach is not the right approach for dealing with this sin issue; rather, God can miraculously take away the struggle and temptation of same-sex attraction. If he does, that will be replaced with some other sin struggle, as our sin nature cannot be eradicated this side of glory. The Holy Spirit gives victory over the sin nature but not complete eradication. So temptation continues, but not more than we can bear (cf. 1 Cor 10:13). Having eternity in mind when we think about singleness and marriage helps those with same-sex attractions have a more correct understanding than what the world thinks.

PL: *What is a good working definition of what you call “holy sexuality”?*

CY: Holy sexuality has two paths: If you are single, it means being faithful to God by being sexually abstinent. If you are married, you are faithful to God by being faithful to your spouse of the opposite sex. Holy sexuality is chastity in singleness and faithfulness in marriage. For most, singleness is not a choice, it is default, a reality for everybody at some point in their life, sometimes more than once. As true Christians we are defending the sanctity of marriage, but sometimes we do so without truly understanding what Paul says in Ephesians 5. It is the mystery of Christ and the church (v. 32). As John Piper says, “Marriage between a man and a woman here on the earth is just a shadow of the eternal reality of Christ being wed to the church. So when that becomes actualized in the end times, there is no more need for a shadow.” The purpose is a reflection of Christ and the perfect marriage of Christ being wed to his bride.

PL: *The practical ethical challenge that we are facing today is, What is the problem with chastity in a monogamous same-sex relationship? Is it better than being promiscuous?*

CY: Marriage should in no case be viewed as the cure for sexual immorality, whether it is an opposite-sex biblical marriage or same-sex marriage. I wrote an article with Rosaria Butterfield, “Something Greater Than Marriage,” to counteract the idolatry of marriage both in the world and as Christians.² The most deceptive form of idolatry is to worship something good. Good things are not meant to be worshiped; only God is. Marriage is not the highest ideal of love, but an expression of love, because God himself is the highest ideal of love. Many world religions claim their god is loving, but the God of the Bible is love as an ontological reality. Marriage does not have a monopoly on love, but it is one expression of love, and certainly not the greatest. God’s love is followed by our love for God. Furthermore, the Old Testament emphasizes marriage, family, children, offspring, tribes, and clans, and the New still emphasizes family, but even more the church, as the body of Christ, the spiritual family, and the local church. In 1 Corinthians 13, read many times at weddings, the context of what Paul was talking about is not the love between a husband and a wife, but how we are called to love each other in the body of Christ. So when people say, “Why can’t they love each other?”—loving each other as a brother or sister in the Lord is the relationship that will last eternally. Marriage is not the only way to experience intimacy.

PL: *How do you counsel people who have a family member or friend who will be entering into a same-sex marriage, since it is legal and part of our culture, and who are wrestling with the question whether they should or should not go to witness and participate? Do you have guidance, or is it a matter of conscience?*

CY: I have heard both sides of the story. For me personally, it would be extremely hard. There are too many things at stake in a relationship with a loved one or friend who is gay. Do they know what we believe, not merely on biblical sexuality but our understanding of the gospel, and have we communicated that to them? But the other thing is, do they know we still love them? If you do not go, what you believe is clear, but whether or not you love them is unclear. On the other hand, if you do go, it is clear you love them, but what you believe could be misunderstood. There is tension on this issue. I encourage people to pray and fast. I think it is more an issue for the individual conscience. It is not God’s will, and it is a sin to marry this way, but what about going to the celebration? If God calls you not to go, I

² Written after the *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision of the United States Supreme Court in 2015. Christopher Yuan and Rosaria Butterfield, “Something Greater than Marriage: A Response to the SCOTUS Decision,” *The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention*, June 30, 2015, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/something-greater-than-marriage-a-response-to-the-scotus-decision>.

suggest that you not tell that individual through an email, a text, or a phone call, but do your best actually to go out of your way to tell them face-to-face. Show by your actions that they are important to you. And this is a tough decision; it is most difficult for parents who have gay children because that decision could be a make-or-break decision. Not going might have decades of ramifications, or forever. Parents have to communicate what they believe to their children. Everyone at a wedding is there to celebrate, but sometimes that is not the case. Sometimes in-laws go even though they do not approve of the wedding. They have communicated it, but they are present because of their love for their child, not because they approve the union. The pinnacle wedding in the Bible is Christ and the bride. Weddings are not something to be played with or just a ceremony. I would have a hard time going, but I leave it up to the parents. Parents who are having a difficult time may consider not going to the ceremony but going to the reception.

PL: *What advice do you give to Bible-believing churches about effective ministering to those who are in a same-sex relationship, whether married or not, to engage them with both authentic love and Bible teaching?*

CY: As a proponent of expository preaching, I do not think there needs to be a focus on specific topics. God's sovereignty leads you to address this appropriately in preaching his Word, as sexual immorality is touched upon many times. People ask me, "Should we allow gays in our church?" That is kind of a nonquestion, because of course, they can sit next to the other sinners! When a gay couple comes to your church, imagine all they went through to walk into an evangelical, Bible-believing, gospel-centered church. So welcome them even if they look out of place.

Then the question shifts to serving and membership. We have to be biblical and consistent. Membership in a church has to be based upon conversion; unconverted people do not become members. It is complex because the church has to be different. The issue is not whether a member is sinning or has sinned but whether that individual is in unrepentant serial sin. So if a member has sinned, there needs to be individual biblical restoration, as in Matthew 18. If it comes to the church level in the discipline of unrepentant serial sin, maybe probationary membership will be the outcome. Disciplinary action practiced should be restorative, as that is its goal. The same approach needs to be applied for someone who wants to become a member or serve in leadership: any unrepentant serial sin needs to be addressed before a person can move forward in serving or in leadership. I would want to do what I can to have an unrepentant individual to stay at that church and allow the Holy Spirit to continue working in them.

Sometimes pastors ask what to do if a gay couple comes up after the sermon and asks, “Will you marry us?” Obviously, my answer is negative, but I would not tell them so right away, because I want to continue in dialogue with them. Rather, I would say, “Can I take you out to lunch? I want to hear more of your story.” That would be my answer to anyone who asked, including a heterosexual couple. If we really and truly believe in the sanctity and the goodness of marriage, let us treat it in that way.

PL: *Is it the work of the church to try to encourage someone who has left a gay relationship to find a heterosexual relationship, or should we leave it in God’s hands? Instinct says, “Let us do something to make it biblical,” and maybe that’s wrong.*

CY: Yes, we should not push and should be consistent with all single adults. We should avoid pushing them into marriage because if biblical marriage is good, biblical singleness is also good. If you are single, praise God and serve God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. If God provides a potential partner, first get to know one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, be friends, and serve together in the Lord. God will make it apparent whether to marry or not. We should not hold marriage up as some success.

PL: *Do you have a final thought that maybe you did not address that you would like to add?*

CY: I am excited about my new book *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel*. There are many good and excellent books on sexuality, in particular by Rosaria Butterfield.³ I want to build on those, and one of my hopes is to remind us that as we address the topic of sexual identity and minister to unbelievers who have same-sex attractions or identify as gay, we need to highlight not only the centrality of Christ but also the body of Christ. We cannot have Christ apart from the body of Christ. Sometimes our focus on what to do or not and practical theology eclipses the importance of the local church. The Great Commission commands us to “go and make disciples” (Matt 28:19): disciples, not converts. The context God has provided for discipleship to happen truly is not a support group or a parachurch group, but primarily the body of Christ, the local church. Parachurch organizations can be helpful but are not the solution that Christ offers. That is the takeaway as we address this topic or any other topic.

PL: *How should we pray for you? You mentioned you are HIV positive. Is it a*

³ See, e.g., Rosaria Butterfield, *Openness Unhindered: Further Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert on Sexual Identity and Union with Christ* (Pittsburgh: Crown & Covenant, 2015).

challenge that we should be lifting up as you continue to serve, or other aspects of your life?

CY: Thank you, Dr. Lillback. Definitely my health: God has been so gracious. I know I have a promise from Isaiah 53 that by his stripes I am healed, whether it is on this side of glory or the other. God has given so much wisdom to the researchers and doctors who have given us great medication, so I am doing all right; my life and health are in God's hands. Pray for my parents and me. This is not my ministry, but it is our ministry. My parents and I travel together—as I have a policy of never traveling alone—so they also speak with me. They are getting older: my father is 78, and my mother is 76. So pray for God's will, that God will give us the years he wants us to serve together, and we will do that with joy and power and energy. Also pray that with my book coming out, that when I am attacked by gay activists, that it will not take away the joy, and I might be able to respond and speak and write with truth and grace.

PL: *I do want to conclude in prayer for you and respond to your wonderful ministry: I praise God for you, Christopher. Thank you, it has been great to have been with you.*

Lord, I thank you for my brother in Christ who has been remarkably drawn to you, who has been given deep insight into Scripture and into the unique needs of our neighbors in some of the most challenging parts of human relationships that are negatively and diversely viewed in your church. Thank you for the work that Christopher has been called to do with his parents. Would you bless them, would you extraordinarily multiply his ministry of speaking with his parents as well as the forthcoming book and other books they have written. Would you do abundantly more than we could ask or think, for this need is so substantial. We pray that you will help us all, and may Christopher's leadership be anointed by your grace. We pray, Lord, for the barbs, the fiery darts, the criticisms, the assaults, and resistance that may come in innumerable ways. Would you help him to be strong and grounded in Christ, filled with your joy and persevering strength that his life might bring hope to many. We lift him up to you with gratitude. This we ask, Lord, that you will use this interview and the things that come from it to bless many for your kingdom's sake. We pray it all through Christ our Lord, Amen.