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Response to Rebecca Davis, “‘My Homosexuality is Getting Worse Every Day’: Norman Vincent Peale, Psychiatry, and the Liberal Response to Same-Sex Desires in Mid-Twentieth-Century America.”

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Every summer, members of Marble Collegiate Church—where Norman Vincent Peale served as a pastor for fifty-two years—hand out cups of water to the perspiring marchers in the New York Pride Parade. Davis’ remarkable essay helps fill in the historical developments connecting Peale to the current queer-friendly stance of his former congregation, and it also shows just how contradictory and paradoxical his contributions were.

Davis focuses on an amazing trove of letters written to Peale by men and women expressing “hope, confusion, and desperation” (357) about their same-sex desires, and she insightfully analyzes them within the postwar history of liberal Protestant encounters with the therapeutic sciences. Her conclusion points to the ambiguous legacy of Peale’s therapeutic theology. On the one hand, she shows, liberal Protestants’ close alliance with progressive sexual science facilitated their increasing acceptance of gays and lesbians; on the other, more conservative versions of a Protestant therapeutic continue to inform faith-based ex-gay therapies. Davis’ analysis of the “therapeutic” emphasizes its complexity—both its liberating aspirations and its regulatory edges.

There is a thread in Davis’ analysis of the therapeutic that I want to complicate yet further. The thread is labeled “sin,” and she connects it to a particular biblical passage—the New Testament text of I Corinthians 6:9. Davis draws from letter writers’ queries about this passage to point up Peale’s missing theology of sin. Despite Peale’s lengthy moral reflection on other topics, he offered no comment on this passage’s clear condemnation of homosexuality. Rather than resolving letter writer’s moral quandaries, Davis notes, Peale’s response to letter writers’ worried questions about the Bible was a kind, but brief, encouragement to see a psychiatrist.

Peale’s response followed the prevailing advice found in pastoral counseling journals, which insisted that pastors should stay away from the familiar, but problematic, territory of moral judgment. The clinically trained theologians and professional psychiatrists who wrote the advice to pastors instructed them to respond to homosexuals “therapeutically” rather than “morally.” Homosexuality, they explained, was a psychological condition and not a willful transgression. Pastors should respond kindly and non-judgmentally and encourage their charges to find the help of a competent psychiatric professional. Medical treatment rather than moral advice, in this discourse, was the healing balm for homosexuals’ condition. So, on the face it, it seems right to say, as Davis suggests, that pastoral counselors like Peale lacked a “robust theology of sin.” (361)

I would suggest, however, that this approach to sin should also cue us to Liberal Protestants’ theological commitments. On their own terms, pastoral counselors eschewed sin language because they held to a theological anthropology distinct in many ways from that of their conservative Protestant counterparts. Spiritual maturity, the fundamental goal of pastoral counseling, required a “non-judgmental” approach believed to free individuals from the cultural

constraints of taboo, judgment, and conformism. The endpoint was spiritual and relational authenticity, an ideal assumed to culminate, as Davis notes, in healthy, happy, heterosexual marriage. The foundational assumption of liberal Protestant therapeutic theology was that humans, if freed from the constraints of legalism, would naturally gravitate toward the good. Thus, their engagement with ideas about sin focused not on individual sinful behavior, but on the troubling doctrine of sin itself as a source of judgment, a cause of human anxiety, and a taproot of sexual maladjustment. This optimistic assessment of natural human progress, no less than the disease diagnosis of homosexuality, cohered with many liberal Protestants' religious and theological views of human nature.

Their conservative counterparts tended to interpret therapeutic practices of unconditional positive regard and the rhetoric of self-fulfillment as a kind of willy-nilly permissiveness that only further enabled human sinfulness. You might say that the two traditions of Protestantism assumed opposing versions of the proverbial slippery slope. Conservatives insisted that humans needed moral regulation to stem the otherwise inevitable slide into worse and worse perversion. Liberals, on the other hand, wanted to release those constraints to give humans the freedom to ascend toward spiritual maturity. Their very different visions of human nature, however, both idealized the same goal at the top of the slope: happy, heterosexual marriage was the pinnacle of human well-being and spiritual maturity. The liberal therapeutic emphasis on self-discovery and authenticity, no less than the sin-focused theologies of their conservative Protestant counterparts, provided methods for regulating sexual deviance and for producing and encouraging sexual normalcy.

A particularly telling evidence of the overlap in Protestants' midcentury views of homosexuality is the paradoxical history of that notorious passage from Corinthians. The phrasing of that passage cited by the letter writers to Peale came from the 1946 published Revised Standard Version (RSV), which has the dubitable distinction of being the first version of the Bible to contain the word "homosexual." The RSV, like the therapeutic theology of pastoral counseling, was very much a product of liberal Protestants' faith in modern progress and of their labor to synthesize residual theological certainties with emerging empirical approaches to human knowledge. The translators of the RSV, tasked with updating the archaic prose and time-bound theological assumptions of the King James, decided to replace and fuse two words—"abusers of themselves with mankind" and "effeminate"—into the single, streamlined "homosexuals."

Thus, another legacy of liberal Protestants' therapeutic project, I would contend, are the seemingly obvious literal meanings of the sacred texts that appear to mark a timeless tradition. Standing, as we do today, on the other end of several decades of debate over whether or not this passage's plain prohibition against homosexuality should actually be interpreted as a condemnation against "modern" gays and lesbians, it's hard to imagine that this text previously had other literal meanings. Anyone who ventures into nineteenth-century Protestant laments over "self-abuse" will find other common interpretations of I Corinthians 6:9, and "effeminacy," too, encompassed non-homosexual meanings. Earlier Christians who read alternative, non-homosexual meanings in the King James followed other interpretive traditions, and the particular phrasing of the earlier translations allowed for interpreters to assume other plain meanings of the text.

This is not to say that Christians of the past did not condemn acts of sexual gratification between people of the same sex, but it is to point to one example of the ways in which a seemingly timeless biblical tradition was shaped by earlier Protestant encounters with the therapeutic sciences. A consequence of these encounters was a new interpretive tradition that re-drew the boundary between “natural” and “unnatural” sex as a simple divide (regardless of the act in question) between the acts and desires that occurred between people of different genders and those that occurred between people of the same gender. Not only textual interpretation, but also even the very words of the text, bears evidence of a therapeutic synthesis. The New International Version, the most popular translation today among evangelical Christians, translates I Corinthians 6:9 in phrasing very similar to the original RSV. Protestants’ synthesis of faith and science, often seen to be foundational for their liberals’ eventual acceptance of gays and lesbians, has also worked to shape the particular anti-homosexual phrasings of texts that their opponents have embraced as fundamental Christian traditions.