



DESIRE AND TEMPTATION

Essays on the concupiscence controversy

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Introduction

This little book started life as a series of articles for Faithroot.com in 2024. At the time a little controversy had begun to brew in conservative evangelical circles. Technically the debate was about recovering an old theological term and concept, that of “concupiscence.” However, there also was an edge to the debate. The specific applicatory focus was on whether or not there was a difference between sexual orientation and sexual practice. This very narrow focus on one area of desire and the technical nature of the debate between theologians made for what might be considered a bit of a minority sport and so it was a large debate in terms of the players it pulled in, the length of books, the number of articles and the passion with which people held their position and disparaged others. However, it didn’t really break into the mainstream of conservative evangelical conversation.

I engaged in the conversation for three reasons. First of all, when we strip out Latinate language about concupiscence and instead talk about sin, desire and temptation, the conversation becomes highly pertinent to pastoral life. Secondly, I thought that there was benefit in moving the debate away from that narrow focus on sexual orientation because surely those who are same sex attracted are not the only people who struggle with their desires. Thirdly, because as I read the literature, I became convinced that at least one side seemed quick to quote their opponents in a way that didn’t seem to fairly represent them. If they were struggling to represent contemporary interlocutors accurately, could we be confident in their ability to engage with historical authors and with Scripture well? The result was the articles that make up the chapters of this book.

The issue became a live one again in May 2026 with the sad news that Sam Allberry had resigned from ministry at Immanuel Nashville. Allberry had been a significant part of the creation of Living Out and had consistently argued for the distinction between orientation and behaviour. He resigned after an inappropriate relationship with another man came to light. Sadly, some interlocutors were quick to jump on this as ammunition for their side of the debate. This is disappointing because it replaces careful biblical exegesis with ad-hominem attacks.

I still want to keep the focus broad and practical because the pastoral relevance of a doctrine of sin and desire is for all believers. However, it is possible that this will serve as a primer for those wishing to better understand the background to that specific controversy.

1 Romans 7, the normal Christian life and missing the exam question

There are a few debates going on around the question of sin and the believer at the moment. They seem to link back to a current fascination amongst reformed academics about concupiscence. I'm intending to write a little bit more about this over coming months.

However, one strand I've just picked up on is a little debate about the meaning of Romans 7. This is the bit where Paul appears to describe a form of inner turmoil, wrestling between being the man he wants to be and knows he should be and the man that he is.

For a detailed look at the text and interpretation issues, see the next chapter. TLDR, you can roughly divide the debate between those who think that Paul is talking about the normal Christian life, he is speaking biographically about himself as a believer and those who think that he isn't.

In terms of current debate, I want to pick up on one specific thing. The view that Paul is describing the life of the believer here has been labelled by some as the traditional or classical position. I'm picking up, that as with other debates, they are going on to suggest that those who disagree with their interpretation of various historical commentators are in danger of undermining orthodoxy and ushering in perfectionism.

I think I can see why this is the case. Romans 7 understood as being about the normal life of the believer is definitely problematic for those who take a perfectionist view of the Christian life, that it is possible to know complete victory over sin in this life so that all temptation is resisted.

However, just because one view is problematic for another view, does not mean that those who disagree with the first view do so for the same reasons. As I noted in my previous article, there are a number (not just two) of interpretations of Romans 7.

It's like the debate over Brexit. Some people were for Brexit because they were in favour of tighter immigration controls, however, there were many who saw the EU as something to get out of that didn't care much at all about immigration. Meanwhile there were also a lot of people who wanted tougher controls on immigration who voted against Brexit. That of course is the problem when we assume that every disagreement is binary.

You will notice in my previous article that I do think that Paul is talking "biographically" in the sense that he is saying "this is how I relate to sin and the Law." However, I also argue that he is not giving us a chronology. This means that we cannot say that Romans 7 offers us a view of the normal Christian life.

My point though is not that Christians can't and don't experience the kind of challenges that Paul describes in Romans 7. Rather, it is that Romans 7 is not intended to tell us what the Christian life is or should be like. That's not the exam question that it, or indeed the whole section around is answering. Rather, the question Paul is interested in is to do with the Law and what it can/cannot do versus what the Spirit can do.

This is important because it means that what Paul says in Romans 7 may be true of the believer but that is not what the text is about. I can say that it isn't about that in order to get people to focus in on the question Paul is addressing without denying that the believer does experience a battle with sin. This is because I'm not dependent on Romans 7 for that, there are plenty of other Bible passages that show that the Christian has this battle and so will need to resist sin and repent, not least the very next chapter in Romans.

What concerns me is that instead of having a discussion about the text, what it says and what it means, once again we have evangelicals talking past each other along the lines of “if your position doesn’t sound quite like my interpretation of what x (historical figure) said, then you are leading us into serious danger. Once again, we seem to have people finding great dangers not based on what Scripture says and in so doing I would suggest are distracting us from the real dangers of deserting Scripture and denying the Gospel.

3 How can I be free from sin?

One of the greatest blessings and greatest challenges of a Christian is that our conscience is re-awakened. This means that we are even more keenly alert to our own sinfulness. We become more aware of how ugly and destructive lust, hate, greed, selfishness, pride, anger, gossip and slander are. And yet at the same time we are more aware of our own proneness to such things are. So, if you are wrestling with a particular habit and temptation, wishing you could be free from it but finding that you keep sliding back into that area of sin, you are not alone. But that's not what we want to hear. What we are really concerned to know is whether there is hope, a way out.

Well, if Romans 6-8 is taking us into the area of sanctification, then that's where we would expect to find help as we seek to grow in godliness and holiness. So, we will find help in the second half of Romans 7. There are some challenges along the way as we seek to get to grips with the text, not least because there's been some debate over the years about who Paul has in mind when he writes. Is he:

- Writing biographically about his own experience before becoming a Christian?
- Writing biographically about his own experience after becoming a Christian?
- Personifying Israel as the man under the law and sin?
- Describing Adam's experience before and after the Fall?^[1]

Each of these has been proposed at various times in history. We'll explore the options in more detail later but first of all let's dig in and see what the text actually says.

A look at the Text

V7-8. The hypothetical question set up by the previous six verses is "does this mean that the law itself is sinful?" After all, what we've been seeing is that The Law is associated with what it means to live in the realm of sin and that salvation frees us from that realm so that in Christ we have died to the Law. Does Paul have a negative view of Torah? By no means! He once again replies. However, what the Law does is draw our attention to what sin is and shows us what it is. Here, Paul uses the example of coveting, that is to desire what is not yours. I suspect this is a deliberate choice because of the association with covetousness and the awakening of lust and desire. It is not the, that The Law is sin but rather that sin (note how it is personified here) makes use of The Law for its ends. It grabs an opportunity using the commandment to cause me to covet. Sin lies dormant or dead in our lives, inactive and then the commandments cause it to spring to life.

V9-11. Paul then describes his own relationship to sin and the commandment as follows.^[2] He says that there was a time when he lived without the law. He was alive and he was innocent concerning the commandment. The result of hearing the commandment was that sin which was dormant, sleeping or dead came alive in him and he died. The implication is that there can in effect be only one ruler who controls and shapes a life. If sin is ruling and controlling your life then you are not. In that sense you are dead.

The purpose of the Law and the specific commandment in view here is to give life. Remember how the promise to the people of Israel was that obeying the law was to choose life and blessing over death and curse. However, the result for Paul is the opposite. Again, it is not that the Law itself kills but that sin uses it to kill, to put me to death.

V12–13 This reinforces the point that the problem is not with the Law. The Law commends goodness and forbids evil. The commandments themselves are good things. The law is righteous, it is a just requirement. So, it is not that The Law as a good thing does something bad, calling my spiritual death. Once again, Paul reiterates that the problem is with sin. Note also the good purpose even in that. Sin is shown up for what it truly is in all its ugliness.

V14 Paul now introduces two categories. The Law is spiritual but I am flesh. This has been misunderstood at times to distinguish between physical matter and spirit leading to a dualistic or gnostic understanding of nature and matter itself seen as evil. However, this is not what Paul has in mind - we know that from the wider context of his attitude to physical creation and physical resurrection. Rather, flesh is used to describe human nature/identity in its opposition to God. Indeed, in this immediate context it points to our helpless state of being enslaved, we have been sold to sin. Sin owns us. The Law then properly belongs to the spiritual realm, to God's kingdom. So, when used as the constitution by the kingdom of sin and Satan it is out of place and there lies the problem. Paul will return to this point in chapter 8.

In **V15- 16** Paul utters words that we may well identify with. He says that he doesn't understand his own behaviour and action. He does the things he doesn't want to do and he doesn't do the things he does desire. The fact that he is wrestling with his conscience proves that the Law is right, he agrees with its condemnation of sin.

V17 – 20 So, if he is doing the very things that go against his will, what is happening? Paul says that this is a consequence of what we saw earlier. Sin has taken up residence, putting his will to death so that "sin lives in me." He is under the control, influence and direction of sin. The consequence then is that he must conclude and confess his own lack of goodness because sin dominates. Notice that in verse 18 his statement that "no good dwells in me" is qualified by "in the flesh." In this case "flesh" could refer to human sinful nature as it does elsewhere, so that Paul is saying "with regards to my sinful nature" or outside of Christ. However, it is also possible as Moo suggests that he is here distinguishing the physical body from the mind "the mind is willing but the flesh is weak." Linked to the reference to "members" or body parts we find here too, I am inclined to agree with Moo.^[3]

There are echoes of Genesis 4 and God's warning to Cain that sin crouches at the door in **V21**. Paul seeks to right but evil is ever lurking to knock him of course from this. Notice too how Paul describes this as a form of law or rule too.

V22 -23 The conflict is there because of what his own inner being – his true self desires. He longs to please God. He echoes the Psalmist, he finds delight in God's Word, specifically in the Law. Here he identifies with the blessed and happy man of Psalm 1. Further he identifies with the Psalmist's description in Psalm 119 of God's Word as light and lamp. However, if there is a good law at work on his mind, the Law of God then that is in conflict with another law, rule or principle for living, another constitution if you like. This is the law of sin, or that belongs to and is controlled by sin. It is at work "in his members" or in effect in his body. This gives us vivid insight into how temptation, especially lust and covetousness works, it isn't just about an intellectual response but often there is a physical and emotional craving too.

V24 Paul's reflex response is to cry out. He recognises the horror of this situation, struggling to extricate himself from the ugliness of sin. Who will rescue him? What does it mean for him to be delivered from "this body of sin"? This could refer to a desire to be delivered from his mortal body and certainly at times we will feel the longing for glory. However, I take it to be an

expression of the desire to be delivered from temptations and desires that overwhelm him due to the weakness of human flesh.

V25. However, he is not without hope and will not give up on hope. Instead the passage finishes with a prayer of thanksgiving. His trust is in Jesus, even if there is this tension within, his mind is captured by Christ for godliness.

Who is talking?

I promised at the start that I would return to the question about who the “I” in Romans 7 is. Is it,

- Writing biographically about his own experience before becoming a Christian
- Writing biographically about his own experience after becoming a Christian
- Personifying Israel as the man under the law and sin?
- Describing Adam’s experience before and after the Fall.

Different Christian scholars have aligned themselves with each of the positions over the years. For example, Tom Schreiner argues for the first position whilst Douglas Moo holds a combination of Paul describing Israel’s history with Paul writing biographically.^[4] His view then is that Paul is speaking for himself but as one who identifies with his people and their history. That would not be out of character with his understanding that we are incorporated together into Adam and into Christ, in the same way it would be possible for him to see himself as in a sense “in Moses” and “in the Exodus people.”

It is possible that Paul is using the first-person singular as a figurative device to speak for someone else or even to speak as Israel. Such a literary device is not unknown, although this would be unusual for Paul.^[5] In support of the Adam option, we might note that he is the only person who could truly say that they were alive and without sin prior to the coming of the Law. However, Adam was alert to the specific commandment “don’t eat from the tree...” from the beginning and so it is unlikely that Paul is referring to that command, all the indicators are that he means the Law of Moses which Adam never knew. So, if the use of “I” is a literary device, then it is more likely to point to the people of Israel. However, as I said, this seems to be unusual for Paul and so I believe that he is speaking personally.

But if Paul is speaking personally, then is he speaking about his experience now? Is the experience of conflict between what he wants to do and what he does something that affects him as a believer? Or is Paul thinking back to the past and what life was like prior to Salvation?

Well both views are not without their challenges. On the one hand Paul says that “nothing good dwells in me.” (v18) and so he is completely unable to do good at all and that would point us to someone who is unregenerate as it appears to describe Total Depravity and the helplessness of being dead in our sins. On the other hand, Paul also says that “I delight in the law of God, in my inner being” (v22). Can an unbeliever say that? Whilst some have suggested that a diligent Jew would delight in the law, I want to contest that.^[6] You see for them to delight in the Law has, as I’ve alluded above placed them with the Psalmist and so I want to suggest that the one who delights is the one who is finding joy. So, the devout Jew who lived prior to Christ and delighted in the Law was one who enjoyed and loved God, this suggests faith in the promise and so I would argue that they belong with the pre-Christ believers of Hebrews 11.

How then do we resolve the tension. I think it is by coming back to Paul's aim here. His aim is not specifically to answer our questions at this point about what we do with the specific tension and struggle we experience with temptation and sin. It's not that these verses don't help us do that and it's not that Paul won't address that issue but that to get those answers we need to read chapter 7 along with chapter 8. However, at this point he is still answering a previous question.

The exam question is this "was the law a bad thing, did it cause evil and is it then useless?" And what Paul wants to do is to show us at this stage that the Law is not bad, it is a good thing, something to delight in because it shows us the reality and the awfulness of sin. However, the Law cannot save us, it cannot make us right with God, it cannot make us holy. In chapter 8:3-4, he writes:

"For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin,^[c] he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

Paul's purpose is to show us that God is dealing with the problem of sin and that includes the ongoing struggle we have with temptation but the solution is not through a legalistic approach, not through the Law of Moses but through the Law of the Spirit. To respond to temptation, we need to know that Law of the Spirit and the assurance that there is no condemnation and no separation from those who are in Christ Jesus. If the old mechanism did not work before we were in Christ, then we should not try to return to it now that we are in Christ.

This means that I believe that Paul is talking personally. "I" means "I" if you like. However, if it is biographical and person then that is not in the sense of Paul giving us a chronology. It's not his intention to say "I was innocent up until my Bar -Mitzvah, then I came under the law and was dead in my sin, now I am a Christian and delight in the Law." Rather he is driving home the point that the Law brings condemnation to sinful nature and so we need the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit.

A Look at ourselves

Where then does this leave us? How does that help us answer the dilemma I described at the start as we so often identify with Paul's cry, we feel like the wretched man who cannot do what he wants to and does what he does not want to.

Well, with the context of Romans 8:1 "There is now no condemnation" and Romans 5:1 "Having been justified, you have peace with God" to help us, I think that there are two crucial applications for us. The first is that if this is your heart cry, if you genuinely are someone who delights in God's word and God's law, who wants to please him then that is evidence of conversion and so your battle with temptation should not rob you of assurance. That is what Satan would want to happen.

However, the passage also shows us that if we want to be godly then there is way through to that by going back to old, failed methods. There is no way through via legalistic law obedience. How are we going to face temptation, not by trying harder in our own might to keep the commandments but by way of the Holy Spirit.

I think this is particularly helpful as we consider gospel witness in urban contexts. Think about the challenges you encounter on estates and inner city contexts including drug, alcohol, pornography, gaming, self-harm and sexual addiction. We see people coming to faith from

messy backgrounds and we are delighted, excited, encourage. But we don't know what to do with the mess they carry with them. Further, although their hearts desire is to follow Jesus, those addictions as well as a life time of abuse and trauma mean that their bodies are battered and weak still craving pleasure, satisfaction and safety from those things even though their minds tell them that these things are wrong and harmful.

The temptation we face as pastors, elders, church planters and evangelists is to resort to legalistic rules and control. The temptation they face is to seek hope and help in such things, then to carry an extra burden of guilt when they fail again. So, if this passage does one thing, it tells us how not to pastor people from messy backgrounds as the struggle with addiction, habits and temptation.

How should we pastor them? Well that's where Romans 8 comes in!

[1] See Schreiner, *Romans*, 360-365 and Moo, *Romans*, 425-431.

[2] Remember that we will cover who and when exactly he is talking about later.

[3] Moo, *Romans*, 458-459.

[4] Schreiner, *Romans*, 365, Moo, *Romans*, 431.

[5] See Moo, *Romans* 427.

[6] Contra Moo, *Romans*, 461.

4 Ruined authors to retrain: Clickbait Evangelical scholarship

David and Jonathan Gibson have edited a new book called “Ruined Sinners to reclaim”, it’s part of their series on the Doctrines of Grace and follows on from “From heaven he came and sought us” on Definite Atonement.

Paul Smith has reviewed the book in Evangelical Times and notes:

This book on total depravity (the second in a series on the [Doctrines of Grace](#)) aims by church history and theological precision to ‘enrich our exegesis and rescue us from error’. The example of error in the editors’ introduction is John Stevens’s book on temptation. They state that Stevens ‘presents a Roman Catholic position on unbidden and unwanted desires’ and ‘ends up implying that there are parts of our fallen human natures that God’s grace does not need to redeem’. [\[1\]](#)

Now, the “Doctrines of Grace” are fantastic and worth a study in their own right. However, I am concerned that once again we are seeing an example of what looks like becoming the modus operandi of contemporary evangelical authorship, especially when coming from those seeking to write academically for a popular audience.

In this particular case, it is clearly nonsense to suggest that John Stevens is in the kind of error that would seek to imply “that there are parts of our fallen human nature that God’s grace does not need to redeem.” John’s view of concupiscence (strong desire, especially sexual desire) may be right or wrong. The specific debate is about whether or not desires themselves amount to sin, as in thoughts that we need to be repented of).[\[2\]](#) It is important to recognise that we can distinguish something as a sinful act from something that relates to our fallen, sinful nature and therefore needing specific ongoing repentance from.

At this stage, I wish to make a general point. Too much of what has been advertised as “must read, groundbreaking” over the past few years has turned out to be turgid and lacking in depth of insight. There seems to be a tendency at the moment to think that popular academic writing involves announcing that this or that issue is of first importance that we’ve all got it wrong and that specific people are promoting error. We are warned that such people are expressing views that are a danger to the church.

The reality of course is first that there is a disagreement over secondary matters that are pushed up as first importance. Second, I think there is often a difference of language and that leads to people talking past each other. Third, I think that both the biblical and pastoral insights of men who spend the majority of their time applying God’s Word to pastoral care are treated dismissively. Finally, we end up with extreme, uncharitable and untrue accusations.

We saw a lot of that kind of thing with the “EFS/Classical Theism” debate. I fear that we are beginning to see the same kind of thing over the Doctrine of Sin and Total Depravity.

There may be a discussion to be had on concupiscence. To be honest I’m not sure yet whether it is a major issue for Evangelicals or a minor concern for academics and authors. However, if we are going to have a discussion on it, I hope that it will be one that is charitable and that benefits the church.

[\[1\] Ruined sinners to reclaim](#)

[2] I will probably write a little more about this soon.

5 Theological debate is not always binary

I've noticed a tendency in terms of contemporary hot potatoes to assume that, or at least act as though, the debate is binary. I'm thinking specifically of the complementarian/egalitarian, EFS and Concupiscence debates.

What I mean is this. Often a specific theological position is developed in response to a perceived error, this may not be heresy but may be or it may be simply an over emphasis on something, a taking of an extreme.

It is important to remember that many theological positions have been developed in those ways. The doctrine of the Trinity was developed and fleshed out in response to Arianism and other heresies, complementarianism came in response to a perceived accommodation of radical feminism and when you look back at the Reformers you can see that on concupiscence people like Calvin are seeking to counter very specific Roman Catholic teaching.

Then what happens is that other Christians come along and they explore the issue further, noting that because theologians and their theologies are fallible that new risks have developed. So they articulate a different approach.

I think that out of this comes two problems. First, that the new developments are seen as in disagreement with historical positions because of their wording. The assumption is that, for example, the current Concupiscence position is the same as that of Calvin, Augustine etc and so someone who expresses differently is assumed to be in full disagreement with Calvin whereas, it may be possible that both sides have in fact ended up in a slightly different place to the reformer. Secondly it is presumed that they must therefore hold to the same views as Calvin's opponents.

EFS provides another example. The prominent proponents of EFS were Wayne Grudem and Bruce Ware. They were responding to approaches that they feared would lean into modalism. Their respondents from a neo-classical-theism position were concerned about subordinationism and a potential semi-Arianism.

There are other theologians who have contributed to the conversation, some like Mike Ovey were willing to use the EFS label. The presumption seems to be that if you use that label then you are holding exactly the same position as Grudem and Ware on everything. Yet it is clear from reading the three that there are differences in methodology and content.

Meanwhile others would not use the label but this does not mean that they land with the neo-classical-theists either. Why does this matter? Well first because in the theological debates themselves, we end up in a situation where people talk past each other and where they assume the worst of each other. This makes good conversation hard.

Secondly it matters because it leads to a disconnect between the debate and the real life of church. Whilst the debate is going on, pastors are getting in with shepherding the flock. Many are unaware that the debate is happening. I suspect that EFS and concupiscence will pass most by.

It is important to be clear that this doesn't mean that all those pastors are theologically ignorant on pastoral issues. They may not know the history of the debate. They may not have the same terminology but they are living the challenges on a day time day basis.

6 Denial, desire and sin 1 John on Temptation

Significant to the conversation about sin and desire is what John has to say both in 1 John 1:8-9 and 1 John 3:9. At the start of his letter, John states that we are in denial if we claim to be without sin and so should confess our sin in order to be cleansed and forgiven. In chapter 3 though he says that those who are born of God don't sin. Is John contradicting himself here, or is 1 John 1:8-9 not about believers? Well in fact, I don't think there has been much controversy over how we understand those texts. Crucially, John is talking about a continuous event. The NIV renders it "continue to sin."

In other words, a believer will not continue to persist in sin. We might say that they won't just go habitually with the flow. This doesn't mean that they will always succeed, there will be times when they succumb to temptation. When they do, then there should be rapid confession and repentance. However, if sin no longer rules their life, then they will not happily and habitually continue in it.

This means that the normal Christian life is not meant to be one where we simply give into sin and accept its presence and dominion in our life. If we understand Paul in Romans 7 to be suggesting that, then we have woefully misunderstood him. Sin is meant to be resisted. It is meant to be put to death. The point in Romans 7-8 is that this can only be done through the Spirit not through the Law.

In summary, the normal Christian life is not meant to be one where we live in happy cohabitation with sin or defeated by sin. This doesn't mean that we won't be subjected to temptation. Temptation is not itself sin, nor is desire in and of itself. Giving in to temptation is sin, allowing those desires to dominate unresisted is sin. The Christian will continue to experience temptation, they should resist it. John is clear that there will be times when we fail to resist and we need to repent. However, the expectation in Scripture is not just that the Christian will fight against sin but through the Holy Spirit will win.

I've seen some suggestions that such an understanding will take away from justification and even from the hope of the Gospel. I'm not sure how this is possible. It seems to confuse justification with sanctification.

Going back to what John says, I think we see beautiful pastoral wisdom which isn't present in some of the academic debates today. We are meant to be challenged and shaken by what he says in 1 John 3, it should cause us to take a long hard look at our lives. What I suspect is that most of us will find that there are areas where we can say "I am not continuing in this or that specific sin." I don't mean that you never trip up in those areas but your normal experience is of resistance and victory when tempted (I'm not interested in those sins that we are not tempted by because you can hardly claim that there is resistance there). There may even be some areas where as a result of long term resistance, the victory is such that you never experience temptation in that area now. That should be cause for joy but not complacency. However, we will also be challenged because we will realise that there are areas where we have not been resisting, where we have allowed habits to form. That is not how things should be but John does not leave us alone with our guilt and shame. The challenge comes in the context of the assurance and hope that:

if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.

Concupiscence, contraception and pastoral carelessness

In his chapter of Ruined Sinners to Reclaim, Stephen Wedgeworth outlines his understanding of a Protestant doctrine of concupiscence before landing on two areas of application, both are around sex and sexuality. The second is about same sex attraction but the first is about contraception.

Whilst he doesn't go so far as ruling out contraception entirely, it becomes clear that he takes a negative view and is at least suggesting a high level of caution.

His take is founded in the understanding that children are a primary good in marriage. From there if I'm reading him right sexual pleasure divorced from procreation is at least potentially sinful. He raises scenarios where a couple are married but with no intention, indeed a positive rejection of having children.

As Wedgeworth is talking specifically about concupiscence, then it seems to me that his concern is with a husband or wife's sexual desire for their spouse.

A couple of points stand out here. First, his example, rather than illustrating the robustness of his doctrine of concupiscence serves only to highlight the complexities. The view that concupiscence is sin suggests that the initial desire is sinful.

Yet, the decision about contraception highlights the potential complexities of a process. Is the husband's initial desire for his wife really sinful or is it the later decision to use contraception? It might be argued that this decision had been made prior to the specific desire but wouldn't that mean that the whole marriage relationship was sinful rather than one act?

Indeed, might the desire at the initial stage be seen not so much as temptation but rather an interruption to the childlessness of the marriage, a godly prompting?

All of this of course does assume that sex without procreation is sin. This is where I believe the pastoral carelessness is, its about the willingness to throw out undeveloped ideas to explode like grenades without thought about how they will land. This is the difference between that surgical care of the pastor and a kind of reckless destructive attitude.

It is worth saying up front that I do agree that children are one of the important purposes of marriage. If you are hearing me suggest that we should treat this lightly, you are mishearing me. I also am aware that it is possible to enter into a marriage relationship without consideration for this and in a way that becomes a form of extended individualism

However, I think it is worth remembering that physical children are only one of the purposes of marriage. Marriage is rooted in God's recognition that it wasn't good for Adam to be alone and so Eve is made as helper in the context of work and worship. Obviously, filling and subduing the earth must involve procreation but there is more to it than that. There is the subdue/stewarding/ordering aspect as well as the filling aspect.

There are therefore other reasons for marriage than procreation. A Christian couple may be spiritual parents as they make disciples and partner in Gospel ministry. A couple may also parent through fostering or adoption.

I have said many times before that the decision not to have children may not be selfish and indeed for various health reasons may not be a simplistic choice. There are of course decisions about timing and about number of children that are legitimate.

The other factor is the assumption that sexual intimacy as a narrow aspect of marriage is only for procreation. Yet I think there are clues in the Wisdom literature including Song of Songs that there are other aspects to and reasons for sexual desires and intimacy.

This should surely encourage some caution before we rush to judge the use of contraception as sin.

Even if we have theological or ethical question marks about its use, surely this should discourage us from introducing such concerns in the middle of discussions about other things without doing the careful ethical/theological thinking and without some degree of pastoral sensitivity.

8 Do we need to repent of our desire?

I'm coming to the issue, first and foremost as a pastor with a concern to help others who are either in pastoral ministry of some kind or considering ministry to be equipped for the work. Therefore, I want to specifically address two questions. These are the same questions I always keep coming back to.

1. What does the Bible have to say on the matter?
2. How does that affect how we live?

Now, a lot of the current debate seems to be around what has been believed and taught through history. I have an interest in that perspective and will come to it later. However, it is important to remember that whilst Reformed Evangelicals are concerned to know how the church through history has interpreted God's Word so that we don't introduce novel interpretations, our concern remains "What does the Bible teach." This is true for other areas of Doctrine as well. For example, we are concerned with what the Creeds say about the Trinity, along with Athanasius, Augustine, Hilary and others but only in order to see how they summarised, interpreted and applied Scripture not because we see them as separate spheres of authority.

1. What does the Bible have to say about sin and desire?

Our first stop needs to be back at the beginning in Genesis 1-3. It is worth noting first of all, that when God makes Eve, whilst the word "desire" is not specifically used, Adam's response in song suggests a desire for her and the author's commentary that this is why men leave their parents to cleave to their wives points to a positive aspect to desire. In other words, desire in itself is no wrong, nor is sexual desire.^[1]

In Genesis 3, we read about the first example of temptation, the serpent encourages the first man and woman to look at the forbidden fruit and desire it. They see that it looks good, is tasty and they desire the autonomous power that Satan promises them. Now, it is clear that their desire is already becoming disordered, they long for things that they are not meant to and so are tempted to achieve them through unlawful means. At the same time note though that although the line may seem a little blurry from our perspective, God's command, warning and judgement, including the first sense of shame and guilt are specifically concerning the act of eating the fruit, not the desire for it.^[2]

There is an intriguing and puzzling footnote to the sub narrative about desire because when addressing Eve, God says:

"Your desire will be for your husband,
and he will rule over you."^[3]

There has been much discussion and debate about what this verse means and whether or not it has positive, negative or ambiguous connotations.

Now, the result of Adam and Eve's sin in eating the fruit is that we are all fallen, Sin came into the World through Adam according to Paul and with sin, death to all.^[4] Paul's point in Romans 5 is that we all are considered guilty and subject to condemnation because of Adam's act, we all fall under the penalty. Note, that explicitly it is death that is described as coming to all people rather than sin, though my understanding is that death here includes our fallen, sinful nature. So, Paul will frequently use the term "sarx" or "flesh" to refer to corrupted human nature. It is our sinful human nature that renders the Law powerless to change and save.^[5] God

in Christ condemns sin, Christ takes the penalty on himself and so we are set free from the power and dominion of that fleshly nature. Our freedom is found in the Spirit.^[6]

Paul distinguishes those whose minds are “governed by the flesh “. Note that this clearly points to unbelievers because first of all, they cannot escape from hostility to God and secondly, Paul makes clear that such statements do not describe the believer (v9-11).

Paul goes on from there to insist that Christians should “put to death the deeds of the flesh.” In other words, he recognises that Christians will continue to wrestle with sin.^[7] This also suggests that Christians will face temptation to sin. We know this first because Jesus himself experienced and resisted temptation, secondly because God equips us with the weapons to resist temptation/^[8]

When considering desire, we might also want to reference 1 Corinthians 7 and Paul’s advise to single people that marriage is better than “to burn with passion.” Colossians 3:5 talks about the need to put to death “lust, evil desires and greed.”

Pastoral implications

We may surmise that desire in and of itself is neutral and can be a good thing. This includes sexual desire, both the specific desire for one woman, your spouse or potential spouse but I would also suggest that this arises out of a general desire for sexual intimacy.

The Fall affects all aspects of our nature, we are dead in sin. One aspect of this is that our desires become disordered. We long for things that we should not or we desire things that are not in themselves wrong but seek them at the wrong time or in the wrong way. Temptation worth with those desires encouraging us to have them and to act on them.

Does this mean that our desires are “sin.” Well, I guess there is a sense in which they are. They are sin in that they arise out of a fallen human nature. However, we also need to be clear tht Scripture sees the believer as no longer under the authority and control of that nature. There is of course the now and not yet dynamic at work in that Christians still experience those desires, Christians are still subject to real temptation.

However, I would suggest that Scripture does not tend to talk about the temptation and desire as sin in the sense that it is itself a sinful act to be repented of. However, it can become sin when it moves from desire to lust or greed.

It may be helpful then to distinguish desire, temptation and lust. Desire refers to those internal longings which may be healthy or may be distorted. Indeed, I suspect that all of us will experience even our healthiest desires as to some extent corrupted and distorted. Secondly, temptation is the means by which Satan seeks to either cultivate wrong desires or encourage us to act upon them. Finally, I would argue that lust is when we move from simply having those desires to tolerating, accommodating and entertaining them. This is when we move from desire and temptation to sin. It is not sinful to have those desires but it is sinful to entertain and cultivate them, to allow them to dominate so that in effect we hand back control of our mind to The Flesh. Indeed it is also sinful to become tolerant and complacent about those wrong desires because at that point we become disobedient to God’s Word by failing to put them to death.

^[1] Genesis 2:23-25.

[2] Genesis 3:1-7.

[3] Genesis 3:16.

[4] Romans 5:12.

[5] Romans 8:3.

[6] Romans 8:4.

[7] Romans 8:13.

[8] Ephesians 10:11.

9 “Temptation comes from our own desires” What does James have to say about sin, desire and temptation?

James 1:13-14 says:

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 (ESV).

The NIV translates *epithumia* as “evil desires”, although whilst the word can have the sense of lust and so is associated with concupiscence, it does have the simple meaning of desires and affections.

Can we read from James 1 that our desires are themselves sinful and therefore that temptation is itself sin.? I think that we can observe a close connection between desire, temptation and sin itself if it is the desire that in effect tempts. However, as with previous examples, I’m not convinced that this means that the desires are in and of themselves sin. Rather, this again points to the disordered nature of post fall humanity. Our desires are confused, disordered, corrupted and so we find ourselves longing for the wrong things and seeking them in the wrong way. In other words, we fail to seek God’s kingdom and righteousness first, trusting that all other good things will be added. So, the desire tempts when it draws (“lures”/ “drags) and distracts us away from God’s priorities.

Desire has in effect been given personality and agency here and there may be something in this about the fallen human nature, or “flesh”. However, I’m not convinced that this is meant to over abstract the nature of temptation as though it is a kind of impersonal force. Rather, the point is that James is saying that God is not responsible for your sin, you are.

In fact, here is the risk if we take a word from a text and primarily treat it as a source for theological retrieval. This is theological retrieval done badly. We focus on its meaning out of context of what the author is trying to say. James is not offering a lecture on and definition of concupiscence. Rather, to repeat, he is making the point that God is not the author of sin.

This means that the primary point of the passage is simple We are not to blame God for when we fall. We take responsibility because the source of temptation is not God, it’s our own desires. Careful observers will spot that James specifically does not say that desire and temptation are sin, rather, desire, when we act on our temptation conceives or leads to sin.

10 Is there such a thing as “The Reformed view!?”

John Stevens recently drew followers of his Facebook page to a quote from Sinclair Ferguson

Within Reformed theology there has always been a diversity of viewpoint on various issues. Being aware of this saves us from naively (but dogmatically!) saying, “The Reformed view is.....” when all we are entitled to say is, “The view held by a number of Reformed writers with whom I agree is....”!^[1]

I think this is a helpful corrective to what can be a tendency in some Reformed circles and indeed more widely within Evangelicalism to seek to be guardians of orthodoxy, especially when that orthodoxy is narrowly defined and based on historical traditions whether recent or ancient rather than on Scripture. At its worst, we see brothers in Christ accusing each of heresy either explicitly or implicitly.

I’ve found it fascinating and concerning in equal measure to see one example of Reformed debate risk heading down these lines namely the conversation about concupiscence. Some people have been keen to talk about a Reformed Doctrine of Concupiscence. I’m not sure there is such a thing, rather there are many examples of Reformed theologians using the word and talking about sin temptation and desire. Indeed, in a few cases I’ve looked at there seems to have been a conflation in debate about historical or Biblical texts between temptation/desire and arguments for and against original sin and Total Depravity.

Ferguson is right in my opinion to remind those of us who consider ourselves of the diversity that there is in the tradition. It is a tradition that includes for example both Zwingli and Calvin’s views on communion and John Stott and Martyn Lloyd Jones’ views on baptism in the Holy Spirit. We cannot dogmatically announce that the Reformed view is x.

At the same time it is worth remembering that there are boundaries to what it means to be Reformed, just as there are boundaries to evangelicalism and yes to Christianity itself. We can recognise for example that Luther and Wesley were both Protestant but not Reformed and nor would their followers claim to be. There are limits to what counts as the Reformed view. It is instructive to note that those who take an Arminian position on Free Will and Predestination are considered to belong outside of the Reformed Tradition. However, the discussion about Definite Atonement takes a different view. Even back during the controversies around the Synod of Dort there seemed to be recognition that there were differences of opinion here and today, there are 4 point Calvinists who dislike the term Limited Atonement and its formulations. I think though that at the same time, there needs to be some form of recognition there that Atonement is made effective for the elect not just possible by Christ’s death. Additionally, it would be difficult to argue from a reformed perspective for universal salvation so that in a sense, we all recognise that the scope of atonement is limited. The question then is “who limits” and from a Reformed perspective, I believe that we would all want to say “God because He is sovereign.”

When attempting to help students at Oak Hill Theological College navigate the debate about men and women in leadership back in the 90s, David Peterson would sometimes set out a diagram (I’ve used a derivation of this) which set where he considered the Biblical boundaries to be and then suggested that within them was a “field of play” in other words there was room for difference and diversity. Similarly, Mike Ovey when teaching on the Trinity would suggest a triangle rather than a quadrant, again setting out the field of play based on No denial of oneness, distinction and equality. Sadly those who got involved in the EFS squabbles never seemed to have got that memo!

In the same way, I think that we might talk about a Reformed field of play. I'm sure at some point, someone can crystalise this into a diagram with neat definitions and determine whether or not the boundaries form a triangle, quadrant or perhaps a pentagon (let the reader understand). However, in general, I think that the Reformed field of play must properly honour the glory of God recognising his sovereignty, to treat seriously the nature and consequences of sin in terms of Total Depravity and so to acknowledge that we are unable to save ourselves so that it is all about grace and faith.

I think that these kinds of parameters keep the sense of being Reformed meaningful. There is a Reformed perspective whilst allowing for diversity and debate within the Reformed Tradition.

[1] Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole of Christ*, 117.

11 Taking things further: Developing our doctrinal and pastoral thinking

It seems that a significant contribution to the debate is through those seeking to insist that there is a historical doctrine of concupiscence, held by the church fathers, classical theologians and the main reformers. There seems to be a form of theological method at work here that starts with creeds, confessions and historical work. This is similar to the nature of the debate over Eternal Functional Subordination.

I have not taken that approach. I believe that doctrine is developed by engaging with Scripture, doing the hard graft of exegeting texts, understanding them in their context and seeing how they contribute to the overall message of God's Word. I believe that this is the only way to properly do Evangelical Theology. Such an approach is often dismissed as "Biblicist" as though that were an insult. The argument goes that this means we interpret Scripture in isolation from what the church has understood over the past 2000 years and that leads to novelty. So, it is important to state that I don't think that historical theology is to be ignored. I do want to make sure that I'm in good company when interpreting God's Word. It is my intention to have a look too at what has been said throughout history. Obviously, I am constrained in this by what I can access as a pastor from my own study rather than a full seminary library. Such an exercise of course requires humility but also confidence in the authority of God's Word. It is Scripture and not Confessions or historical theologians that is infallible. We should be checking back what they say against Scripture and not the other way around.

It might be helpful at this stage to do two things, first to try and summarise what I think to be the way Scripture teaches on this and to flesh out a bit more my pastoral understanding of the subject and implications. I also will highlight things I've not covered yet. I hope to fill in those gaps when I do more detailed work later in the year on the doctrine of sin as part of the work I'm doing on the Doctrine of Humanity. Secondly, I want to highlight a couple of the pastoral questions that the debate might raise. Whilst a lot of the discussion about application seems to have focused narrowly on one aspect of human sexuality, I want to focus things more widely.

First of all, in terms of doctrine, our starting point needs to be a holistic doctrine of humanity which start with what it means to be made in God's image. This will help us to understand something of what the end goal of salvation is in terms of saving and restoring us. It also has implications for the human life. Because I was just dipping into the debate, I've not gone back to these questions yet.

However, Scripture shows that we are created in God's image, but sin's consequence is the marring or distortion of that image. We don't cease to be made in God's image because we don't cease to be human. The Doctrine of Total Depravity as opposed to complete depravity helps here. Sin/fallenness affects every aspect of our character. This includes our thoughts, imaginations, desires and not just our actions. We are sinners. The Bible describes us as dead in sin. When thinking about desire, this means that there is a distortion that affects our desire.

When we are saved, we are given new life, we are new creations. I think it is important then to emphasise our status as justified, not condemned. Our identity is not primarily as sinners. This means that sin does not rule our lives and control us. There is a discussion I think to be had here about the link between status and experience. Does being a new creation mean that immediately the distortion to our desires is gone? I would argue not. There is a now and not yet dimension to our personal lives as well as the eschatological age we live in. We look forward to future glorification and in the meantime, there is the work of sanctification.

This means that the believer should not sin in that their life should not be dominated/shaped by sin and that this means there shouldn't be continued, complacent, habitual sin. However, Christians will at times sin and this should be repented of.

Sin includes actions, words and thoughts omitted as well as committed. In terms of desires, this means that the desire itself is not a sinful act when a believer is resisting sin. However, if we entertain a desire, then that becomes part of our thought life. In fact, there are two sins, there is commission as we entertain greed, lust, covetousness, laziness etc. There is also a sin of omission because we fail to obey the command to put sin to death in us. At its worst, we desert from the fight.

The normal Christian life includes this battle with sin, a battle that is rooted in our thought life. The battle can only be fought on the basis of God's grace so that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus and only through the Holy Spirit. The Christian cannot resort back to the Law in a legalistic manner because the law only has power to warn and condemn not to free or change us. This is why we preach the Gospel to believers not just unbelievers.

I think it is helpful to think of our desires as coming in bundles.^[1] In fact the baseline desires are for comfort, security and identity but these may be further developed as desires for connection, intimacy and recognition from peers, parents and partners. Then there will be specific desires for food, fathers, mothers, children, friends, a spouse, sex, knowledge, entertainment etc. We can see how desires can become distorted, so that things that should be good in themselves become dangerous and ugly. Furthermore, I would suggest that desires can become confused, muddled up together, particularly because they come bundled up. Think of how hunger and thirst can be confused. Consider too how it is possible to have an adrenaline rush due to fear and confuse that with excitement. Or think about how a child can seek attention at school through bad behaviour because even being told off means that they are seen.

I think that this helps us to see how we can then load expectations onto things and people so that we seek things in the wrong place. For example, we might look to others as replacement father/mother figures. This raises an interesting point because whilst, for example attraction to your spouse is a good thing and not to be repented of, it is possible that you might load expectations on them that are distorted and so to be resisted.

I said that there were some questions arising. One question concerns mental health. How do we treat the emotions and wants that go for example with depression? I think that some treatments of concupiscence might suggest that the emotions experienced by someone who is depressed would be considered as sin. My view is that yes, depression can be caused or exacerbated by sin, it is also possible to be sinful in your depression. However, I do not believe that depression is itself sinful. I believe that it is possible for the depressed to resist sin and be holy in their depression.

Another question concerns addiction. Is an addicted person sinning when they indulge in drugs whether alcohol, tobacco or something else? What about when they are tempted to light up a cigarette or reach for another bottle. My answer would be that if they resist the urge they are not sinning, they are fighting temptation. I would however also note that it might be possible for them to continue to savour the desired feelings that the drug gives in their mind whilst not actually taking it.

One area of sin that I think we tend to pay attention to is how we treat other believers. There might be a number of desires that cause us to verbally attack someone through slander, gossip or gossip. Yet the words we say out loud or type on social media start out as thoughts. We must also consider that there is a point where what we think of another becomes sin even before we say it.

It might be helpful to pursue conversations about these examples of desire, temptation and sin.

[1] I'm grateful to Stefan Cantore for making this point in personal correspondence.

12 But I wish you'd tap danced. Why good theological conversation matters

As noted previously, David and Jonathan Gibson have beef with John Stevens over his book "The fight of your life." Some of their critique is rather peculiar. They acknowledge that it is a short, pastoral work (in fact it was based on a series of talks" and then complain that rather than engaging at length with positions he distinguishes himself from, John simply offers the Biblical exegesis for the position he is arguing for.^[1]

This is a peculiar critique because, first of all, they themselves in their critique of John fail to engage with his exegesis. In fact, they complain that he is out of line with certain historical figures, they insinuate danger in his position but they do not engage and show how his theology is wrong. Of course, they might argue that this wasn't the job of an introductory chapter to an edited work. I would though expect them to signpost at this point which of their authors is going to engage in detail with Stevens. Indeed I would be interested to know whether other contributing authors were aware that the work was being set up to confront Stevens and whether they would want their names to be linked to such an approach? The point remains though, they are asking something of John's book that simply was not within its scope. I am reminded of the time on Britain's Got Talent when Piers Morgan complained that a group of Irish dancers hadn't tap danced.

John has suggested in his book that Wesleyan Perfection and the neo-puritan response of people like Packer amount to the extremes on the discussion of desire, temptation and sin in the normal Christian life. The Gibsons complain:

"The impression unwittingly or not is that simply biblical exegesis is an adequate antidote to either extreme."

Well, may I gently suggest that "yes it is!". Careful Biblical exegesis should be the antidote, at least from an Evangelical perspective. What else are you looking for? They go on to suggest that the problem is that:

"By not laying out the Biblical exegesis of the positions he is challenging, Stevens presents his own interpretations as self-evidently true when in fact there are significant and weighty challenges to his thesis in the great tradition that precedes this book."^[2]

Yet, in fact, that it is not how Biblical exegesis and challenge works. Your challenge to my biblical exegesis should not be "but it is different to these weighty and respected figures." The question should be, objectively, has Stevens got his exegesis right?

Indeed, if this is their concern about Stevens, then why was the memo not given to their own authors. The chapter by Wedgeworth on Concupiscence for example relies on one assumed interpretation of Romans 7.

However, their complaint here begins to highlight one of the challenges in theological debate, especially where the approach is to try and engage with others through the lens of your interpretation of historical figures. I've mentioned before that we need to double check that we've interpreted three things correctly, the words of our contemporary interlocuter, the words of our historical sources and the words of Scripture.

So, in the example that follows, they say:

"At the foundation of Steven's argument is a reading of James 1:13-15 which he believes "draws a definitive contrast between temptation and sin."

They go on to suggest that:

“Stevens appears to have a category of evil human desires that are not yet sinful in themselves.”

They then accuse him of teaching a Roman Catholic view of sin and claim that he has stumbled ignorantly into the doctrine of concupiscence. Notice here the unevidenced presumption of another’s ignorance.

Note that for John to propagate such a view he would need not merely to use similar sounding language (assuming he does) but operate from the same metaphysics or worldview. I will go into this in more detail at another point but it is worth noting that The Tridentine view of sin and desire is rooted in an understanding of the human person being divided into their lower and higher self with will and reason operating as part of the higher self (grace is something that can be superadded or lost from there). From the Catholic perspective base desires can function at that lower level and so because they do not touch on will and reason are not matters of guilt. This is very different to what John is saying in his book.

More importantly, as soon as we see the word “appears”, when judging what others are saying, this should encourage that note of caution and should remind us of our fallibility when interpreting others. Have they interpreted Stevens rightly? Notice that Stevens himself refers to the desires in James 1:13-15 as “evil.” He is not suggesting that they don’t matter. Rather he is simply noting that the text distinguishes out the act of sinning from desire and from temptation. His point is that the desires are to be resisted. I’m not at all convinced that they have interpreted him correctly when attributing Roman Catholic doctrine to him. Though of course we are not helped because they simply assert this rather than demonstrating it.

In terms of people who might disagree with Stevens on this, they offer Calvin’s interpretation of James 1:13-15:

“It seems , however, improper, and not according to the usage of Scripture to restrict the word sin to outward works, as though indeed lust itself were not a sin, and as though corrupt desires, remaining closed up within and suppressed, were not so many sins ...For he [James] proceeds gradually and shows that the consummation of sin is eternal death, and that these depraved desires or affections have their root in lust.”^[3]

Notice first, that the selected quote helps us to see how Stevens is being interpreted. The suggestion is that he would disagree with Calvin at this point but would he? I don’t think there is any evidence to suggest that he would on the basis of his book. First, because to assume that Stevens does not see inner thoughts such as lust as sin is to do so without and in fact contrary to evidence.

One would also have to read his reference to “resisting” sin as the same as Calvin’s description of “suppressing sin” which seems to be quite the bold interpretative leap. In fact, again this is to miss the nature of the reformed disagreement with Roman Catholic theology. It seems most likely that Calvin is rejecting the idea that sin can be excused if suppressed down into the lower self. It is not just about the idea that if might break out from the inner thoughts life of a person into words and actions but they it might break out and up from the lower self in order to contaminate the higher self.

Secondly, they presume that Calvin would disagree with Stevens. Yet is there evidence here that he would? For Calvin to disagree with Stevens, he would have to disagree about there being a

distinction between temptation and sin and to not see the kind of process that John argues that James describes. Yet, those are not things that Calvin says here. He may appear to make such arguments in other places (though I think we need to check back carefully that he means what we think he means) but that is not his point in the quote.

I observed above about the question of whether we interpret three things well with the third being Scripture. The Gibsons are concerned that John Stevens treats his exegesis of James 1:13-15 as self-evidently true. Yet, I would suggest that it is more the case that he treats the meaning of James 1:13-15 as itself being self-evident, trusting in the clarity of Scripture. John hasn't done any fancy leg work on the text, he has pretty much stuck with saying what it says.

James 1:13-15 says:

¹³When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; ¹⁴but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. ¹⁵Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

I am intrigued by the idea that this text is open to multiple interpretations that might substantially differ from what John says where he notes a distinction between sin and temptation and highlights the analogy of giving birth.

I am not at all convinced that the Gibsons interpret Stevens, Calvin or Scripture correctly here.

[1] Gibson & Gibson, 5.

[2] Gibson & Gibson, 6.

[3] Cited Gibson & Gibson, 6.

13 Jesus and temptation

We cannot talk about desire and temptation without looking at Jesus' experience of temptation. We can see this exemplified in the temptation he experienced **in the wilderness from** Satan and secondly in **the Garden of Gethsemane**. Remember that Jesus' experience of temptation is different to ours, he was without sin and so his nature was not fallen. The temptation is external, he is not in any sense tested by a corrupted nature. However, the tempter does interact with his desires.

In the wilderness, the tempter seeks to attack Jesus at a weak point when he is hungry after fasting. He immediately seeks to push on that need, to appeal to Jesus' hunger. In Gethsemane, we know that the disciples were tired, so no doubt Jesus was too but there also that moment of suffering that is coming up.

We might see too that the devil leans into three specific longings or desires: the desire for identity, comfort and security. In terms of identity, this is seen both in Jesus' identity "if you are the son of God" being questioned and in the way in which the devil offers him kingdoms and power. He is offered the comfort and satisfaction of food to remove his hunger. Security is offered by way of protection from falling.

We might also notice the themes of identity, security and comfort in Jesus' Gethsemane prayer. Identity in terms of his relationship to his Father, comfort and security in terms of a desired preference for an alternative to the cup of judgement he is about to drink.

It is important therefore to recognise that those desires in and of themselves are not bad things. It is not sinful for Jesus to desire identity, security and comfort. The problem comes when those desires are distorted and become idolatrous. The tempter's aims are to get Jesus to prioritise one or more of these root desires over other things so that he will seek to fulfil them in the wrong way and at the wrong time. The right desire for comfort and its consequent desire for food is distorted into a desire for instant gratification. The desire for security is distorted into the need to test and prove the offered protection of an other and so to behave recklessly.

Now, in the concupiscence debate, much ink seems to have been spilt on when exactly a desire moves to becoming a sin as it is distorted. However, I wonder if we would do better to look at Jesus response to temptation. Scripture seems less concerned with those kinds of hair splitting discussions. Rather, the big point is that Jesus doesn't mess about, doesn't allow time for something to develop. He is on it straight away. He shuts down the temptation by saying no to the tempter and by going obediently to God's Word.

Pastorally, I'm less interested in trying to work out when x or y desire becomes a sin and more concerned with making sure that I and encouraging that others are on it straight away in saying no to temptation. This means that we go to the Gospel to discover how those right desires for identity, comfort and security are properly met in Christ alone.

14 Calvin on sin, desire and temptation

he primary claim of those arguing that concupiscence is sin with the implication that it is sinful to even be tempted is that theirs is the historical position of the church. This will often include a reference to Augustine, although his view doesn't seem to have been as clear cut. However, the claim is also that this was the historical position of protestant and reformed theology in contrast to how Catholic theology had developed.

So, it is worth looking at how the key reformers including Calvin approached the subject and indeed at how some of the confessions and articles of faith to arise out of the Protestant and Reformed positions saw it. I've already referred to Calvin's commentary on James and this is perhaps a good starting point.

James 1:12-15 says:

¹²Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

¹³When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; ¹⁴but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. ¹⁵Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

Calvin distinguishes the trial or temptation of v12 as external temptation from v13 which he considers internal temptation:

Here, no doubt, he speaks of another kind of temptation. It is abundantly evident that the external temptations, hitherto mentioned, are sent to us by God. In this way God tempted Abraham, (Genesis 22:1,) and daily tempts us, that is, he tries us as to what are we by laying before us an occasion by which our hearts are made known. But to draw out what is hid in our hearts is a far different thing from inwardly alluring our hearts by wicked lusts. He then treats here of inward temptations which are nothing else than the inordinate desires which entice to sin. He justly denies that God is the author of these, because they flow from the corruption of our nature."[\[1\]](#)

On verse 15, he comments:

He first calls that lust which is not any kind of evil affection or desire, but that which is the fountain of all evil affections; by which, as he shews, are conceived vicious broods, which at length break forth into sins. It seems, however, improper, and not according to the usage of Scripture, to restrict the word sin to outward works, as though indeed lust itself were not a sin, and as though corrupt desires, remaining closed up within and suppressed, were not so many sins. But as the use of a word is various, there is nothing unreasonable if it be taken here, as in many other places, for actual sin."[\[2\]](#)

Notice here that Calvin is insistent that desire itself may well be sin. We should not assume that sin is limited to "outward works" or our words and actions. It is possible to sin in our thought life, particularly with regards to lust. The desire itself may actually be sin.

This he contrasts with the Roman Catholic position:

And the Papists ignorantly lay hold on this passage, and seek to prove from it that vicious, yea, filthy, wicked, and the most abominable lusts are not sins, provided there is no assent; for James does not shew when sin begins to be born, so as to be sin, and so accounted by God, but when it breaks forth. For he proceeds gradually and shews that the consummation of sin is eternal death, and that sin arises from depraved desires, and that these depraved desires or affections have their root in lust. It hence follows that men gather fruit in eternal perdition, and fruit which they have procured for themselves. By perfected sin, therefore, I understand, not any one act of sin perpetrated, but the completed course of sinning. For though death is merited by every sin whatever, yet it is said to be the reward of an ungodly and wicked life. Hence is the dotage of those confuted who conclude from these words, that sin is not mortal until it breaks forth, as they say, into an external act. Nor is this what James treats of; but his object was only this, to teach that there is in us the root of our own destruction.[3]

The Catholic view of Concupiscence is set out in the Council of Trent decree on Original Sin:

This concupiscence, which the Apostle sometimes calls sin,[23] the holy council declares the Catholic Church has never understood to be called sin in the sense that it is truly and properly sin in those born again, but in the sense that it is of sin and inclines to sin.[4]

The reference to “the apostle” is to Paul in Romans 5-8. The Catholic position was that concupiscence is not necessarily sin in and of itself for those who are regenerate, although it come be. It relates to sin and is referred to as such, not because it is an actual sinful act but because it is caused by original sin and can cause sin itself.

That the Catholic church seems to be potentially disagreeing with Paul or at least seeking to clarify him should set off a few red lights. This also perhaps indicates that when contemporary authors and preachers argue that desire and temptation are not sin, that they are probably not speaking about the same thing as Paul, the Council of Trent or Calvin.

Trent seems more concerned with desire as lust, in other words, the desire which is entertained in the believer’s mind. It is clear that those who reject the possibility that any desire in and of itself and the initial temptation being sinful would consider lust to be sin and indeed here as well as sexual lust we might include other forms of craving such as greed and covetousness.

As I’ve observed previously, it is helpful to have a feel for the metaphysic behind Catholic thinking. See for example this explanation of concupiscence:

In its widest acceptance, concupiscence is any yearning of the [soul](#) for good; in its strict and specific acceptance, a desire of the lower [appetite](#) contrary to reason. To understand how the sensuous and the rational [appetite](#) can be opposed, it should be borne in mind that their natural objects are altogether different. The object of the former is the gratification of the senses; the object of the latter is the good of the entire [human nature](#) and consists in the subordination of reason to [God](#), its supreme good and ultimate end. But the lower [appetite](#) is of itself unrestrained, so as to pursue sensuous gratifications independently of the understanding and without regard to the good of the higher faculties. Hence desires contrary to the real good and order of reason may, and often do, rise in it, previous to the attention of the mind, and once risen, dispose the bodily organs to the pursuit and solicit the will to consent, while they more or less hinder reason from considering their lawfulness or unlawfulness. This is

concupiscence in its strict and specific sense. As long, however, as deliberation is not completely impeded, the rational will is able to resist such desires and withhold consent, though it be not capable of crushing the effects they produce in the body, and though its freedom and dominion be to some extent diminished. If, in fact, the will resists, a struggle ensues, the sensuous [appetite](#) rebelliously demanding its gratification, reason, on the contrary, clinging to its own spiritual interests and asserting its control. “The flesh lusteth against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh.”^[5]

As I’ve previously observed, the Catholic view of human nature assumed a higher and lower-self with reason and grace applying to the higher-self. It was there that it was presumed sin could either be acquiesced or resisted. Calvin insists not only that something is sin, even if it does not break out into outward acts but also even if it is suppressed to the lower-self.

At this stage it is worth noting that Calvin has not argued that temptation is sin or that any and every desire is automatically sin from the beginning. However, this is of course, not all that he has to say on the subject: In a sermon on Galatians 5:19-23, he argues:

The Popish doctors display their excessive stupidity by saying that it is not a sin to think evil, or to be tempted, as long as one does not consent to do it. A man could be tempted to wrong his neighbour in some way; he may have a grievance or frustration which makes him want to avenge himself upon the person who has offended him. If the occasion were to arise, he would be delighted. This is not sin, they tell us, unless he has consented to the temptation with resolve. They are only wiping their mouths like whores, or showing their snouts like sows, after they have wallowed in the mire and dirt. A man may murmur against God and be angry with him, and doubt whether God will look after him; he may be troubled by many mistrustful thoughts, so that he cannot find refuge in God; but none of these things are sin according to the Papists. I am not saying that the common herd are the only ones to be deceived in these matters, for all of their schools hold to the doctrine and belief that this is not sin. They do say that all is sin before baptism; but after baptism, all becomes virtuous, however much we may doubt God, or however many grievances we have against him. We may be very impatient with him, or agitated about this matter or that — but we cannot be accused if we have not been moved to practise evil outwardly! In short, if we are inclined to all that God condemns and reproves in his law — all that is unlawful — it is nothing. They are well suited to believe such stupid things! After all, they have made idols and grotesque statues to worship, and now their minds have become darkened as they make merry around their gods, scoffing at us, as at a little child holding forth about righteousness and integrity. We must not, therefore, be surprised if such people behave like this. Because they have falsified the glory of God and destroyed it, they must be completely brutish.

As for us, let us note the words which I have already quoted from the apostle Paul, namely, that the law is spiritual. If we are convicted as rebels against God because of external, visible acts, let us remember that God will find an infinite number, indeed, an abyss of evil desires writhing inside of us, though they are not regarded by men as rendering us guilty. We must, therefore, conclude that in everything and in every way we are drowned in perdition, until God looks in pity upon us, and draws us out. The way to apply this text of Paul’s to our instruction is as follows: inasmuch as we are unaware of the sins that lurk within us, it is necessary for God to come and examine our lives. After this, we will learn to humble ourselves. So then, once we see the sins that are known and evident to all, and which cannot be excused, even in the eyes of little children, may

we be led even further to sound out the depths, and acknowledge that all our appetites and thoughts are like many rebellions against God. Yet if each of us were more careful to examine ourselves in this way, we would all surely have occasion to tremble and sigh; all haughtiness and pride would be cast down and we would be ashamed of every aspect of our lives. But we know that each of us turns away as much as we can from any knowledge of our sins; we throw them all behind our backs. God does not forget them; though we may want them to be forgotten, he has to keep them in remembrance. This is what Paul attracts our attention to in this passage.^[6]

Here again, it is worth bearing in mind that Calvin is responding to Roman Catholic thinking rooted in the metaphysics I've discussed above. The point is that you cannot excuse sin by arguing that it was just in your inner thought life or that you were not consenting to it. Again, this goes against the notion that things happen at the level of the supposed lower-self are excused. Furthermore, it helps us to recognise that it is not enough simply to passively not consent, if in effect that means we go along with the notion of sin, if we entertain and nurture the desire. Indeed, we are required to resist temptation. If we have simply not put it into action just because we have not had the opportunity to do so, then we cannot claim to have resisted temptation. In other words, if Uriah the Hittite had returned home from the frontline early for whatever reason and David had not been able to put his plan to take Bathsheba then this does not mean he would have been blameless.

Calvin also touches upon Concupiscence in his Institutes of the Christian Religion when he says:

“We hold that there is always sin in the saints, until they are freed from their mortal frame, because depraved concupiscence resides in their flesh, and is at variance with rectitude. Augustine himself does not always refrain from using the name of sin, as when he says, “Paul gives the name of sin to that carnal concupiscence from which all sins arise. This in regard to the saints loses its dominion in this world, and is destroyed in heaven.” In these words he admits that believers, in so far as they are liable to carnal concupiscence, are chargeable with sin.”^[7]

Again, note here that he specifically talks about “depraved concupiscence” as something that “resides in the flesh” and this this means “there is always sin in the saints” until death. Once again, this does not look like a clear-cut suggestion that the initial desire is sin, that to be tempted is sin. It is however a recognition that the believer continues to have a struggle with sin, and that this includes an internal struggle. As I've noted previously, we do need to tease out a little bit more about what Calvin means by this and what contemporary interlocutors mean when they use the language of sin, temptation and desire.

[1] Calvin, John. Commentary on James (pp. 17-18). Ravenio Books. Kindle Edition.

[2] Calvin, John. Commentary on James (p. 19). Ravenio Books. Kindle Edition.

[3] Calvin, John. Commentary on James (p. 20). Ravenio Books. Kindle Edition.

[4] [Decree Concerning Original Sin & DECREE CONCERNING REFORM | EWTN](#)

[5] See [CATHOLIC ENCYCLOPEDIA: Concupiscence](#)

[6] **John Calvin**, *Sermons on Galatians*, trans. Kathy Childress (Edinburgh/Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1997), 542-43

[7] Calvin, 3.3.10.

15 More Reformed perspectives on sin and desire

We've had a look at what John Calvin has to say about desire (concupiscence). It is worth widening out our look at the Reformed tradition.

The Westminster Confession

The Westminster Confession's 6th chapter is all about sin. I note that in the version I've got in front of me, the term concupiscence doesn't appear in the main text but only in a footnote where it is used in place of "sinful passions" (NIV & ESV) in Romans 7:5. [1] The key statement is at article 5:V. This corruption of nature, during this life, does 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. [2]

Corruption refers to the affect of original sin on Adam and his descendants. The point then is to do with indwelling sin and so the point made is that sin has an ongoing impact on the believer. There is a "now and not yet" dimension to our post conversion nature. On the one hand, Christ's atonement means that we are no longer under condemnation and that Christ goes so far as to put to death our sin. That is one perspective on our situation. However, from another perspective the sin is still there. We know this reality and both Romans 7-8 and 1 John 1 and 3 recognise this.

It is worth noting that the Westminster Confession does not go so far as to say that all desire is definitely sin and certainly does not talk about temptation. However, the point that "all motions thereof" are sin suggests that desire could be and indeed I would argue indicates that it would be likely to be considered sin. However, caution is still required in my opinion because, as we have noted previously, there is a complexity to how desire functions. Certainly, I would not take any suggestion from this that temptation is desire.

It is also fascinating to look at how the Westminster Confession is treated in some circles. Kevin DeYoung even goes so far as to preach a sermon on this chapter, working through the text of the Confession. Although technically his Biblical text is James 1:12-15, by starting with an exposition of the Westminster Confession, this becomes the lens through which James is read. In fact, we are reading James 1:12-15 through the lens of DeYoung's fallible interpretation of the Westminster Confession, a fallible text itself. [3] What we are seeing is that there are question marks even about those interpretations.

The 39 Articles

The Church of England's 39 Articles are often recognised as a Reformed document. Here's what article 9 has to say about Original Sin:

Original sin standeth not in the following of Adam, (as the Pelagians do vainly talk;) but it is the fault and corruption of the Nature of every man, that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam; whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and is of his own nature inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusteth always contrary to the Spirit; and therefore in every person born into this world, it deserveth God's wrath and damnation. And this infection of nature doth remain, yea in them that are regenerated; whereby the lust of the flesh, called in Greek, *(which some do expound the wisdom, some sensuality, some the affection, some the desire, of the flesh)*, is not subject to the Law of God. And although there is no condemnation for them that believe and are baptized; yet the Apostle doth confess, that concupiscence and lust hath of itself the nature of sin. [4]

Notice again that there is a recognition that indwelling sin has a continuing affect on the believer. Here, concupiscence is explicitly referred to. Whilst the authors talk about “concupiscence and lust”, they talk in the singular about them “hath of **itself** the nature of sin.” This suggests that we are not meant to be thinking of two different categories. I would suspect that lust is seen as a significant aspect or example of concupiscence though the problem is broader than sexual lust and refers to all cravings or illicit desires.

The 39 Articles insist that concupiscence has the nature of sin, though exactly what is meant by that is left undefined. Does it mean that every desire experienced and every temptation encountered are themselves sinful acts?

Turretin

One of my favourite Reformed works is Francis Turretin’s Institutes of Elenctic Theology. Here, he sets out a lengthy set of propositions concerning God, humanity and Christian belief before affirming, denying or distinguishing them. They are worth a read if only for a grounding in robust, logical thinking when doing theology.

Turretin says that

“Concupiscence is used either philosophically and means the same as concupiscible appetite or theologically and popularly in which sense, evil propensities of the will belong to it.” [5]

In other words, Turretin understands it to refer to “the flesh” or “sinful human nature.” Again, it is associated with indwelling sin. It is worth observing, that contra the Roman Catholic position he sees it as an act of the will. This is probably not to distinguish voluntary from involuntary desire but rather by removing the higher/lower self distinction, we recognise that all of our desires are in some sense willed. We cannot excuse ourselves from them. In defining concupiscence this way, Turretin is following Augustine whom he says used the term to refer to Original Sin.

Turretin agrees with other Reformers and Confessions in going against the Roman Catholic view that believers no longer sin in this way:

“Now the concupiscence is sin not only in the unbelieving and unrenewed but also in believers and the renewed (whatever the papists may assert who hold that it can be called a weakness and disease of nature and a depravation, the effect of sin and the cause of sins, but deny that it has the relation of sins, but deny that it has the relation of sin properly so called).” [6]

Turretin also understands James 1:12-15 to be talking of concupiscence not only to be the cause of sin but sin in and of itself. [7] This does raise the question as to whether we agree with his interpretation of James 1. However, again, it is worth noting that he has already determined that he is talking about indwelling sin and about lust/evil desires.

Conclusion

It is certainly the case that a significant body of Reformed thinking classifies concupiscence as sin. The outstanding question though is as to whether or not contemporary references to desire and temptation are intended to refer to concupiscence as understood by Calvin, Turretin, the WCF and the 39 Articles.

My suspicion is that people are talking a little at cross purposes about linked but subtly different things. It is important therefore for those who are arguing that our desires and temptations are not in themselves sin that they have carefully thought through how they handle the question of ongoing indwelling sin. Do they have a place for this in their doctrine of humanity?

Those who have been quick to suggest that those who have argued against calling temptation and desire sin also need to give careful consideration to what is happening before leaping to conclusions. When people like John Stevens in his book, “The Fight of your life” or speaking from the perspective of organisations like Living Out seek to distinguish desire, temptation and sin from each other, are they talking about concupiscence as the reformers understood it. In other words are they talking about the ongoing affect of original sin as indwelling sin?

It is worth noting too that the Reformers and current pastoral thinkers are perhaps trying to do two different things. Just as we might be looking for Scripture to do things it is not attempting to do, the same may well be true of historical theologies. It seems to me that the Reformers at the stage are less interested in practical pastoral advice about how to understand your desires and how to respond to temptation (not that they do not consider these matters in the wider scheme of things) and more interested at this point in understanding the nature of original sin and total depravity.

[1] Westminster Confession of Faith, 6.v. [Westminster Confession.pdf](#)

[2] Westminster Confession of Faith, 6.v. [Westminster Confession.pdf](#)

[3] [When Desire Destroys | Clearly Reformed](#)

[4] [Thirty Nine Articles of Religion](#)

[5] Turretin, IX.Xi.ix.

[6] Turretin, IX.Xi.xx.

[7] Turretin, IX.Xi.xxii.

16 Internal or external temptation: does it matter?

One of the issues raised in the concupiscence debate is about the extent to which we can distinguish between external and internal temptation. In fact, in some respects the whole debate is about what we distinguish. So, first of all, there is the question about whether we need to distinguish temptation, desire and sin from each other. However, we also have this question about distinctions between kinds of temptation.

On one level, it is helpful to note that whilst there is external temptation, directly from Satan or indirectly through our culture, peers, the voices of others in our upbringing. On the other hand, there is the way in which James describes our own desires as tempting us into sin. I guess you could argue that if I am in effect tempting myself, then yes, I am sinning. However, I think this over dwells on a possible personification of desire in James 1 and treats the passage as an exercise of applied systematic theology which I would suggest goes beyond its intent.

The distinction can be helpful in terms of understanding how temptation works but if we over distinguish and separate, then I believe it becomes unhelpful. Indeed, it offers analysis that is neither Biblical nor in line with human experience.

First, in terms of Scripture, I've notice that the argument made for how we should understand Jesus' temptation relies more on this attempt at systematic distinction between temptations than what Scripture actually says. What the bible tells us is that Jesus was tempted in every way but without sin. This stops a long way short of the kind of speculation we are seeing in the current debate.

As I've observed previously, when Satan tempts, he does so by engaging with our desires and potential desires. These desires are to do with identity, security and comfort. We see this both in Genesis 3 and in Jesus' experience of temptation.

Similarly, whether or not we attribute temptation directly to the devil or not (my inclination is not to given that he is not omnipresent), I believe that we can observe how temptation is normally an interaction between those external voices from culture, advertising, parenting, education, peer pressure, images and perhaps unhelpful/false advice and teaching and our internal desires so that desires are distorted.

So, it is never so simple in our case as to say that the temptation was internal or that it was external. The two combine in order to lead us astray. It remains the case that Christ was said to be without sin because he did not yield to temptation and that Adam and Eve did sin, not because they were tempted, even though they very clearly were tempted by desires but specifically because they acted on the temptation and the desire.

17 Desire: What is the concupiscence debate all about?

I've so far focused on highlighting what Scripture has to say about desire and temptation. It's probably worth saying a little bit more about what the debate seems to be all about.

In the new volume, *Ruined Sinners to Reclaim*, Stephen Wedgeworth has provided a chapter focusing on "The Doctrine of Concupiscence." He writes:

"One of the more unexpected side effects of recent debates over human sexuality in evangelical churches has been the reemergence of a somewhat archaic word, concupiscence. Writing in *Public Discourse*, Denny Burk and Rosaria Butterfield emphasize the doctrine of concupiscence as a dividing line between {protestant and Roman Catholic understandings of illicit desire." [1]

It is worth making two observations here. First, the way in which this matter has been linked so closely into debates and concerns around sexuality and particularly same sex attraction is a matter of interest. In his own chapter, Wedgeworth's application is primarily focused on responding to Sam Alberry and Wesley Hill on the issue of same sex attraction whilst he also includes a short section with some unsupported, pastorally careless throwaway comments on contraception. [2]

This narrow focus on sex and sexuality is both intriguing from a sociological perspective and concerning from a theological and pastoral perspective. It is intriguing because it raises questions about how social context shapes discourse and thinking.

It is concerning for three reasons. First, this narrowing down raises questions about how we see and understand sex, sexuality and sexual desire themselves. There has at times in history been a tendency to treat these subjects with a level of fear and suspicion. Secondly, it places the attention on certain people and groups of people and even if it is claimed that the application is wider, the fact that the debate focuses on those issues does mean that certain struggles are singled out. Thirdly, it means that we are left with a whole host of questions about temptation, desire and indeed other inner emotions and inclinations that don't easily come under the title of desire on which there is silence. What for example do we make of a person's struggle with addiction or with their temper? What about mental illness, depression, anxiety etc, what are we to make of these?

The second point of note is that a protestant or reformed position is being set up in contrast to a Roman Catholic one. You may remember, first that in the book's introduction, the FIEC National Director, John Stevens is accused of articulating a Roman Catholic view. Additionally, it is helpful to observe how, when commenting on sin, desire and temptation, reformers like John Calvin are often doing so in response to the Catholic viewpoint. Before accusing others of holding a Catholic view, we may do well to identify exactly what that view is. This will help us to be certain as to whether others share that view before we accuse them. It may also help us better understand the arguments that the Reformers were making.

In short, the Roman Catholic understanding of temptation and desire is rooted in a metaphysics where the higher-self is separated from the lower-self. It is the higher self that is the seat of the will and reason. It is also here that righteousness is believed to have been lost from and where grace is super added to. The lower-self is where our baser material instincts come from and are seen as disconnected from our will and reason. The result is that concupiscence is understood as follows:

In its widest acceptance, concupiscence is any yearning of the [soul](#) for good; in its strict and specific acceptance, a desire of the lower [appetite](#) contrary to reason. To understand how the sensuous and the rational [appetite](#) can be opposed, it should be borne in mind that their natural objects are altogether different. The object of the former is the gratification of the senses; the object of the latter is the good of the entire [human nature](#) and consists in the subordination of reason to [God](#), its supreme good and ultimate end. But the lower [appetite](#) is of itself unrestrained, so as to pursue sensuous gratifications independently of the understanding and without regard to the good of the higher faculties. Hence desires contrary to the real good and order of reason may, and often do, rise in it, previous to the attention of the mind, and once risen, dispose the bodily organs to the pursuit and solicit the will to consent, while they more or less hinder reason from considering their lawfulness or unlawfulness. This is concupiscence in its strict and specific sense. As long, however, as deliberation is not completely impeded, the rational will is able to resist such desires and withhold consent, though it be not capable of crushing the effects they produce in the body, and though its freedom and dominion be to some extent diminished. If, in fact, the will resists, a struggle ensues, the sensuous [appetite](#) rebelliously demanding its gratification, reason, on the contrary, clinging to its own spiritual interests and asserting its control. “The flesh lusteth against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh.”^[3]

At this point, you can see why Calvin and other reformers would strongly oppose the idea that such suppressed desires are not sinful.

The third thing of note in the wider chapter by Wedgeworth is talk of a Doctrine of Concupiscence. The full chapter heading is “The heart wants what it wants: A Protestant assessment of the doctrine of concupiscence.”^[4] I wonder how helpful or accurate it is to think of the term as a doctrine in and of itself. Historically, it is perhaps more the case that a Latin term was being used, naturally by Latin speakers to talk about desire. Bavinck includes a section in his Dogmatics on Original Sin and Concupiscence but this falls short of a fully fledged stand alone doctrine.

I guess that in a sense, we can talk about any teaching as “a doctrine of” but the risk is that we start to group and categorise these doctrines and that may mean that we don’t properly tease out such issues.

The problem is that desire, or concupiscence is something that affects us both before and after conversion. Therefore to treat it as a distinct category of doctrine and a subcategory of Original Sin or Total Depravity means that we may not think through carefully how conversion changes us. What is our relationship to original sin after conversion? I note that Wedgeworth presumes that Romans 7 is describing the normal Christian life after conversion but even if this is the case (which I have argued against), it still doesn’t consider how our new identity in Christ affects our relationship to sin.

In previous chapters I’ve suggested that whether or not we call desire itself “sin” depends on how we are using the word “sin” itself. Yes, it can be described as “sin” or “sinful” if we are using the word “sin” to identify fallen human nature. We may also consider how we use the word “repentance” and what is meant by those saying that we don’t need to repent from our desires.

First, if repentance interprets metanoia and we are thinking in terms of a word that has a root idea of “changed mind”, then the resistance that John Stevens describes in his book “The Fight

of your life” may be described as “repentance.” If we are thinking in terms of original sin and its corrupting affect on all human nature, if this is another way of talking about Total Depravity, then there is also guilt and shame so that our response should include remorse. However, if we are talking about our identity as sinners, rebels against God outside of Christ, then surely the repentance in terms of confessing our identity as sinners, being remorseful and turning away from that sin has already happened when we trusted in Christ. Though if I’m feeling a little bit cheeky, I might suggest that this relies on a strong view of conversion and we might equally be concerned about Presbyterian paedobaptist approaches where a person is objectively included in the covenant at baptism and where then we might wonder about the place of repentance and conversion.

We might though also want to consider the possibility that people talking about the need to resist, not repent evil desires are reflecting colloquial understandings of repentance and so are simply saying that the believer should not beat themselves up because they are tempted. Indeed, if we were to do that then we might be succumbing to the exacerbating temptation that Charity Bancroft speaks of, “when Satan tempts me to despair....”^[5]

There are some fascinating and helpful things to draw out when discussing the issues of desire and temptation but a healthy conversation where we don’t talk past each other or rush to accuse is needed and this means taking time to clarify questions about language and metaphysics.

^[1] Wedgworth, 633.

^[2] Wedgworth, 661-662.

^[3] See [CATHOLIC ENCYCLOPEDIA: Concupiscence](#)

^[4] Wedgworth, 633..

^[5] Charity Bancroft, “Before the Throne of God above.”

18 The Contemporary Debate

It's probably about time to engage with the contemporary debate a bit more. So, let's go back to where the current controversy really kicked off and got personal. In the book, "[Ruined Sinners to Reclaim](#)", David and Jonathan Gibson accused John Stevens, National Director of the FIEC of stumbling into error. They noted that Stevens sees James 1:12-15 as drawing "a definitive contrast between temptation and sin."^[1] As a result, they argue that he

"presents a Roman Catholic position on unbidden and unwarranted desires."^[2]

Now, as I've shown in my previous articles, this misreads John who doesn't come close to arguing a Roman Catholic position, he does engage with the plain meaning of the text of James 1:12-15 and his argument is clearly not shaped by the Roman Catholic metaphysics which the Reformers persistently countered. They misinterpret the historical reformed figures who are dealing with the question of indwelling sin and the relationship of our desires to original sin but do not suggest that resisted temptation is sin. Their struggle with interpreting contemporary and historical figures well leaves big questions about their exegesis of Scripture on the same points.

Matthew Mason of London Seminary has been one of the primary contributors to the current debate. In a [seminar](#) for the Keswick Convention he articulates the argument here. What is of note is his response to that question "Is it Biblical?" Note two things. First, he offers Bible references that support the wider doctrines of Original Sin and Total Depravity but not so narrowly the question of Concupiscence. Secondly, the references all point to life before conversion. I would suggest that this highlights two of the biggest problems with the current debate. First there is a conflation of categories so that it isn't clear as to whether we are describing Total Depravity generally, or specific desire. Second, the question of how the believers' experience of Total Depravity differs from the unbeliever isn't given the attention it needs.

The more detailed working on concupiscence in "Ruined Sinners to Reclaim" is Steven Wedgworth's chapter. There, as I've noted, he puts his focus on issues around sex and sexuality and specifically two examples, contraception and same sex attraction. When talking about same sex attraction, he offers a helpful summing up of concupiscence's application.

"The challenge for the Christian struggling with an orientation of same sex attraction would be for the individual so affected to mortify such sin, to make sure that it remains 'reigned-over sin' to use Luther's and Ursinus' categories. If not acted upon, such an orientation would still be understood to be sin, but sin forgiven in Christ. If it were acted upon (even mentally), however, it would become a new actual sin, in need of new repentance."^[3]

They then offer this as a basis on which to evaluate others and offer a quote from Sam Allberry as an example. Allberry says:

"Same sex attractions (along with any other kind of temptation to sin) reflect our own fallenness. But this is not the same as saying the presence of temptation is itself a sin to be repented of. Scripture makes a distinction between temptation and sin ... But we do need to be careful not to imply that a Christian who is faithfully resisting temptation is in sin, merely for experiencing the temptation ...the sincere Christian who is deeply distressed at the temptations he or she is facing may be crushed at the idea that merely having the capacity to be tempted in this way, they are thereby sinning."^[4]

Now look at the two quotes carefully. Are they saying much different? If we were to do what Wedgeworth says and use his conclusions to assess contemporary positions, would we find Allberry wanting.

There are perhaps some differences in choice of language. Allberry talks about “fallenness” and “the capacity to be tempted” where Wedgeworth and the protestant reformers he draws upon talk about “indwelling” or “abiding sin”. In that both are seeking to provide their own labels for something that Scripture talks about, there may be a debate to have about which is the better label. However, I cannot identify much, if any at all, of a difference between Allberry arguing that a Christian should be “deeply distressed at temptations” and should be “faithfully resisting” them as opposed to Wedgeworth’s talk of mortifying sin so that it is “reigned over-sin.”

However, Wedgeworth argues that Allberry’s position “stands in contradiction to the historical Protestant case presented.”^[5] His basis for doing so is that he doesn’t think that Allberry has distinguished enough between external and internal temptation with internal temptation originating from our sinful desires.^[6] This seems to be the crux of the matter, as with Gibson and Gibson it boils down to how we understand desire and even more so, how we understand temptation.

Wedgeworth wishes to emphasise a distinction between internal and external temptation which he believes that Allberry misses. I am not convinced that his assumption here is correct. Moreover, it might be argued that he is over distinguishing external and internal temptation. It is true that Jesus experiences an external, audible and up close encounter with the devil, something which few of us will experience. However, the devil’s tactic is to work on Jesus’ desires, in this case to attempt to distort the legitimate desires associated with identity, comfort and security. We should not downplay the relationship of external influence and internal desires in the normal life of the believer either.

It is therefore important to recognise that Allberry and Stevens are not really in disagreement with Scripture, nor with the historical reformed position. I’m not even convinced that they are fully in disagreement with Wedgeworth’s interpretation of the historical reformed position. Rather, there seems to be a disagreement over our understanding of how desire’s and temptation function and what resisting or acting on temptation and desire look like.

Let’s take a practical example and let’s move away from the terrain of sex and sexuality. Think about how we relate to each other, including, getting close to the bone, our social media interactions. Consider the situation where a person says something derogatory and slanderous to another brother online, maybe it is racist, maybe it even sounds threatening. I hope we would all recognise that this is actual sin. We do not need to say things out loud in the person’s presence nor do we need to physically assault someone to sin in this way.

However, those words started somewhere. Before they were said, they were thought. There was a point where the person entertained those ideas in their head. Again, it should be clear that this is sin. Yet, where did those thoughts come from. At some point, they have been tempted to think better of themselves and worse of another, to believe lies about their brother and about themselves.

At the root of that is surely our fallenness or to stick with Wedgeworth, our “abiding sin.” Yet it is worth noting that things are a little more complex than that somewhere there is an unbidden but innate, internal desire to think, say and do horrible things either to a specific person class of person or people in general.

Rather, as I've mentioned previously, we all have bundles of desires.^[7] At the root of these are the desires for security, comfort and identity. Alongside this, we have the problem of pride, the belief that I am better than others and this comes accompanied by things like jealousy, envy and contempt. Temptation in effect interacts with these things. Indeed, that probably helps us to see how the purely external temptation of Jesus is distinguished from the temptation we experienced. Jesus did not have pride, envy or contempt within him. The temptation had nowhere to take root.

Returning to our example, you can see how a person's desire for identity, security and comfort may become distorted as they seek to protect themselves by damaging those seen as a threat and as they seek to exalt their own status by putting others down.

We should also be able to see the distinctions in the process as desires are confused, conflated and distorted. Hopefully, we should also be able to see the distinctions between desires, temptation and sin.

It is perhaps a weakness of certain theological approaches that they don't seem to engage much with how people and the world function. What we need to do is to move away from a situation where rather than recognising those weaknesses, people are quick to find differences and error where there aren't any serious differences of theology.

[1] Gibson and Gibson, 6.

[2] Gibson and Gibson, 6.

[3] Wedgeworth, 662,

[4] Wedgeworth, 663.

[5] Wedgeworth, 664.

[6] Wedgeworth, 664.

[7] I got this concept from Stefan Cantore in correspondence.

19 Matthew Roberts on desire and pride

Here's a look at Matthew Roberts' book "Pride". Roberts book is primarily focused on the ethical debate around LGBT+/same sex attraction and the Gospel. His starting point is that we have an identity problem. The problem being that humans have an idolatrous concern about identity which means we worship ourselves instead of the living God. The pride motif therefore has a double meaning, both picking up on that sense of love and desire turned inward and the Pride Movement.

I'm not planning a full review here but there are positives and negatives about Matthew's book. The positives are that Matthew writes well. Unlike some of the quite turgid stuff coming out these days, he offers a book that is engaging and readable. Secondly, his big picture Biblical Theology contribution is strong, I would agree with much that he has to say about idolatry and worship. This is perhaps unsurprising as he draws heavily on people like Beale for his thesis that our identity relates to what we worship. I'm not always so sure about his close exegesis, I would argue that he applies a systematic framework rather than specific texts and I'm also unconvinced by his pastoral advice.

However, my primary concern here is with the chapter where he engages with concupiscence. Intriguingly, like the Gibsons, he chooses John Stevens as one of his primary interlocuters.

Roberts begins chapter 4 by asking the question:

"Is sinful desire itself sinful? Are we guilty before God not only for what we have done, but for what we have wanted to do?"^[1]

The first part of the question is a bit of a tautology and invites the American courtroom response "asked and answered" It's a bit like asking "Are terrorist organisation Hamas, terrorists?" "Or is that far right party far right?" However, it is worth noting that he is framing the question in terms of being guilty for what we want to do rather than just what we actually do. He will answer affirmatively that we are guilty for what we want to do. In other words, Roberts regards concupiscence as sin to be repented of.

He then goes on to argue, focusing specifically on the sexual orientation question that if desire is not sinful in and of itself that "there is no shame in it."^[2] It is worth pausing there and asking whether he has handled the issue well. I would suggest not. He is conflating a number of things and collapsing questions in.

First, there is the question about what we mean by saying that something is "sinful" and whether his interlocuters (potential and actual) would agree with his assertion that they don't see desires as sinful. Ed Shaw vey clearly doesn't in his review on the Living Out website. He writes on the statement, "your desires are evil."

"I am very happy with this statement – if anyone can be! I am an Anglican who regularly prays and means these words – in reference to every area of my life:

*Almighty and most merciful Father,
we have wandered and strayed from your ways like lost sheep.
We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts.
We have offended against your holy laws.
We have left undone those things that we ought to have done;*

*and we have done those things that we ought not to have done;
and there is no health in us.*

I believe in original sin, in the total depravity of humanity, because God's word, my church, human history, and my own life demonstrate it again and again."^[3]

Shaw notes that Roberts himself helpfully brings nuance and distinction into the statement that our desires are evil.

"To say our desires are evil is not to say that they are purely evil, for there is no such thing. It is to say that they are at root good desires, implanted in our hearts by the good God as part of his Image in us; yet twisted and misdirected. Every sin can be seen to be this."^[4]

I agree with Ed, that I find this nuance missing in Robert's specific discussion about concupiscence. Shaw notes that in his own commentary on the question of desire, he is simply attempting to give voice to the very nuance that Roberts initially recognises.

The second area of distinction missing at this stage is between talking about something as sinful and saying that the specific person is in the act of sinning so that they need to repent. This involves some consideration of what exactly that "desire is". Roberts notes that John Steven's argues that:

"because Christians are born again, new creations, a Christian's sinful desires are no longer his desires. 'My new self is not responsible for them, nor is it morally accountable for them if I resist them and refuse to act on them.'"^[5]

Roberts thinks that Stevens is wrong here because the scriptures he uses "prove too much."

"We can therefore respond to Stevens' arguments as follows. Taking this last point first, there is simply no biblical ground for arguing that our regeneration means that we are not responsible for our sinful lusts. Stevens quotes Galatians 2:20 'I no longer live, but Christ lives in me' in support of his view, taking it to mean that because we are new creations, our sinful lusts are not ours any more.¹⁷ But this proves far too much, for Paul's theology of regeneration understands both the desires and the acts of the flesh to belong to the old man. If Christ in me means that my sinful desires are not mine, and so no longer sin, then it must also mean that my sinful acts are no longer mine and so no longer sin. After all, Paul says quite plainly in Romans 7:20, 'Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me'. But does Paul, or any New Testament writer, consider that our new creation means that we are not responsible for our sinful acts? Of course not. Rather, the guilt of both sinful desires and sinful acts is real, and the guilt of both is equally taken away in our justification, when we repent of them."^[6]

I think that Roberts is right to draw some question marks here. John Steven's may have overstated the position. However, Stevens does have a point and I don't think it can be so dismissively written off. Roberts draws our attention to Romans 7 but this does mean we have to pay attention to the distancing language there, even if we find some of the implications a little uncomfortable. Romans 7 draws a strong distinction between the old man and the new man. Paul says:

¹⁵ I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. ¹⁶ And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good.

Note the explicit statements both that Paul does what he doesn't want to do but also that he doesn't do what he wants to do. It is worth noting that whilst the focus of the "concupiscence" debate has been very much on our evil/sinful desires and whether or not it is sin to have them or just to follow through on them, there has been a neglect of what Paul explicitly talks about here. Paul turns the focus onto our good desires and our inability to follow through on them.

The old man/new man language in Romans is important because it gets us talking about sinful nature and the difference that new creation makes. This is crucial because, as Roberts acknowledges, Augustine and Calvin both see a distinction between concupiscence pre conversion and after conversion. There is the reality of ongoing indwelling sin, we live in the now and the not yet. This means that our desires will be affected by that sinful nature. In that respect, yes, there is something sinful to be repented of.

However, I think it is worth noting two things, first that whilst doctrinally, we make those careful distinctions between good desires from our regenerate nature and evil desires from our sinful nature, in practice, everything is mixed in together.

Secondly, if we are talking about the old nature, then yes repentance needs to happen but the whole point of becoming a Christian, of being regenerate is that we have already repented. The big refrain in current reformed arguments is that "we are not sinners because we sin, rather we sin because we are sinners." True, however, it is the being sinners that Christ died for, he saved us from Sin not just sins. We have already repented, we have already been forgiven. This also raises questions about the extent to which it is appropriate to carry shame as a believer. My take would be that we do not carry shame but not because sinful desire isn't shameful, rather because Christ has taken away that shame. Indeed, if as I have argued previously, resistance may well in any case be considered an act of repentance as we choose a different mind on the matter, then being ashamed of something probably aligns more with the colloquial understanding of repentance that is being contrasted with resistance.

Of course, and I'm being a little cheeky here, this does presume that your doctrine provides for that moment of clear repentance and regeneration, indeed, more than requires it but provides for it. One of my concerns when reading Presbyterian approaches to paedobaptism is that I'm not sure where that moment is provided for if a believer's child is automatically in the covenant. I think there is a further problem here and this is that when we write as those who have grown up in Christian homes, it is perhaps easy for us to be blasé when talking about the temptations experienced by others, seeing them in very black and white terms whilst not experiencing them ourselves and with the added risk that we are not alert to our own desires and temptations. Now, I don't think that the writer needs to be spilling out their confessions unhelpfully but I wonder whether an element of autobiographical self-awareness from all of us might contribute to a healthier conversation.

If I could make a further observation, it would be this. The debate has been framed in terms of repentance v resistance. However, this does not give enough attention to victory and overcoming meaning that we don't just repent or resist, rather, the fight is taken to the enemy. Sinful desire is not just to be resisted, it is to be mortified, put to death, defeated. Whilst those who have disagreed with John Stevens have focused in on his language

of resisting temptation, the key and brilliant message of his book is that of Romans 8 that victory over sin is possible.

What is perhaps disappointing here is that I would hope that there would be consensus on this truth and I suspect that there is. However, this is currently being lost in the technical

[1] Roberts, Matthew. *Pride: Identity and the Worship of Self* (pp. 73-74). Christian Focus Publications. Kindle Edition.

[2] Roberts, Matthew. *Pride: Identity and the Worship of Self* (p. 74). Christian Focus Publications. Kindle Edition.

[3] [Pride: A Review | Reviews | Living Out](#)

[4] Roberts, Matthew. *Pride: Identity and the Worship of Self* (p 65). Christian Focus Publications. Kindle Edition.

[5] Roberts, Matthew. *Pride: Identity and the Worship of Self* (p. 75). Christian Focus Publications. Kindle Edition. Nb there is a typo in the citation, this is actually at page 42 in John's book.

[6] Roberts, Matthew. *Pride: Identity and the Worship of Self* (pp. 79-80). Christian Focus Publications. Kindle Edition.

20 Self Deception

In recent social media discussion relating to my article on Calvin's view of sin, temptation and desire, one person suggested that the question posed when John Stevens shared my article should be modified from:

“Are we sinning when we experience sinful desires that are unwanted, unsought and that we resist/rejected.“

To:

“are we sinning when we experience persistent sinful desires that we assert to be unwanted, unsought, and that we assert that we resist/reject?“

The person making the comment says:

Introducing 'assert' into the phrasing of the question entertains the possibility of self-deception; that, even if we assert hatred of sinful desire, the persistence of that desire may demonstrate a covert weakness for it and, thereby, sinful concupiscence.

I think that he is mistaken in his suggested change to the question posed. Of course, it is true that the whole pastoral question concerning sin, temptation and desire would benefit from some widening out from the narrow framing of the debate so far, though it is worth remembering that neither John or I have framed the debate so narrowly but have merely responded to others.

Secondly, the suggestion is peculiar, since I note that no one is suggesting that there is no possibility of self-deception. Yet, his reframing raise the question about whether or not we are willing to entertain the possibility that there might be plenty of believers who are genuinely and objectively resisting unwanted desires.

Now, at this stage I just want to deal with the implication he raises from it. I think that the question about whether persistence of a desire demonstrates covert weakness is necessarily linked to the question of self-deception. His claim would be true or false regardless of self-deception. Indeed, I don't think that there would be any dispute with the first half of the implication. Yes, of course, temptation tends to target our weak points and so we should not be surprised to experience repeated and persistence testing at those weak points. This is exactly the understanding that alcoholics work with when excluding all alcoholic beverages from their diet. It's also why there is good wisdom in not appointing the person who has been found guilty of theft or fraud as your church treasurer. Recognising the weak points is of course very different from suggesting that this is “thereby, sinful concupiscence.” After all, we know from Paul that God's grace is not the removal of thorns in the flesh but strength made perfect in weakness.

However, the question of self-deception is worth looking at further. It is a distinct follow on question to the discussion about whether or not temptation counts as sin. So, I wanted to make three brief comments here, not so much to close down the debate as to encourage further exploration.

First of all, pastorally, we need to recognise the real potential for people to deceive themselves. Scripture is consistently clear about this. Part of our pastoral concern as Christians should be to encourage people to learn to be truthful with and about themselves. There are two great helps to this. First, the doctrine of Justification helps us to be more open about our deepest and darkest struggles, especially with ourselves. Secondly, we look more for the Holy Spirit to

examine us, than trusting in our own judgement. This is something of John Calvin's point when he says:

“inasmuch as we are unaware of the sins that lurk within us, it is necessary for God to come and examine our lives. After this, we will learn to humble ourselves. So then, once we see the sins that are known and evident to all, and which cannot be excused, even in the eyes of little children, may we be led even further to sound out the depths, and acknowledge that all our appetites and thoughts are like many rebellions against God.” [1]

Secondly, I am concerned when our default is a hermeneutic of suspicion about the hearts of others. This is particularly true when someone comes to see us and because they are desperate about their struggle. It takes a level of courage to do this. Of course, there is a balancing act here. I usually take a cautious approach in offering pastoral responses, patiently waiting on the basis that it may take time for us to get to know the whole story. However, a hermeneutic of suspicion is something that we best used in introspection rather than as an attitude to others. In other words, I do better to be recognise the danger that I might be self deceived rather than immediately assuming that someone else is self-deceived and deceiving.

Thirdly, whilst there is the now and not yet element of Christian life, I wonder whether we can become over pessimistic in our presumption about self-deception. I wonder whether the believer can really be completely oblivious to where their true wants and desires are, at least over the long term. If we have the Holy Spirit working in our lives and if our consciences have been reawakened when we were raised to new life, then I'm not sure that we can go on deceiving ourselves. There will be at least an element of underlying discomfort and questioning.

Indeed, it is this latter point that means I am likely to lean into the starting presumption that we are not dealing with self-deception when dealing with people who show signs of deep sensitivity.

[1] John Calvin, *Sermons on Galatians*, trans. Kathy Childress (Edinburgh/Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1997), 542-43

21 An alien interloper?

One of the key questions that has come up in the debate about sin, desire and temptation is whether or not we are responsible for our temptations. This in fact is key to the position that Matthew Roberts and others hold. The argument is that the desires which tempt us according to James are our own desires, so that in effect we tempt ourselves. If I am tempting myself, then yes, I'm culpable and it is sin.

John Stevens argues that temptation is not desire. His point is that something crucial has happened at conversion. We are not subject to sin as our master anymore, we are given new hearts that love the Lord. At the same time, there is the reality that we continue to have the presence, even of indwelling sin to fight against. John uses the image of an alien interloper.

“Whilst we have been set free from sin, we continue to live in our fallen bodies, which belong to this present evil age. We no longer have wicked hearts in the way that we did before conversion. The great blessing of the New Covenant is a new heart, and God has written the law on our hearts by his Spirit (Ezek. 36:26; Jer. 31:33). However, we continue to have to live with our fallen flesh and will not be set free from it until we die, when it will be destroyed and our bodies resurrected and glorified. In Romans 7:17 Paul places the blame for this struggle squarely on ‘Sin’, which indwells his fallen flesh. It is like an alien interloper. He laments the fact that he has to endure this permanent struggle because he lives in a ‘body of death’ (Rom. 7:24) but takes great hope in Romans 8 in the power of Spirit to enable him to resist the pull of this indwelling sin until final liberation comes with the redemption of all things at the new creation.”^[1]

Matthew Roberts takes issue with this. In his response he observes that John *takes the view*

“that sinful desires are not my desires at all, but belong to my old self which is an ‘alien interloper’ – so it, not me, is responsible for them. “

He rejects this because:

“Never does Paul suggest that I'm not responsible for my old self because it's not me. On the contrary, he says sin produced ‘in me’ all kinds of covetousness (Rom.7:8), just as James says we are lured and enticed by our own sinful desire (James 1:14). Since Paul also ascribes our sinful actions to ‘sin’ (Rom. 7:20), John's view would mean (though he doesn't intend this) that we're not responsible for our sinful acts either!”

My concern with Matthew's response, which is similar to what he says in his book *Pride*, is that he doesn't pause to give full attention and weight to what God's Word does say. First, in Romans 7:8, sin is personified as “seizing the opportunity.” In a way that does appear to distinguish it from me as a new creation. Secondly, in Romans 7:21-25, he talks in terms of wanting “to do good” but “evil” being “right there with me.” He makes it clear that when he sins, he is doing the things that he doesn't want to do and indeed failing to do what he wants to do. It is incontrovertible that there is a distinguishing of the old self and a distancing of it and sin from our identity in Christ. This may not fit with Roberts' system and yet he needs to give it its full weight and consider why Paul talks in these terms.

What we might want to do is to consider why Paul does this. I want to suggest that one reason is that it highlights the difference that regeneration makes. We truly are new creations, our old self died and was buried with Christ.

Does this mean though that Steven's position requires no responsibility for our sin, including sins in our thought life such as lust? Well, no. I am responsible for how I respond to temptation. It is worth noting that in both Romans 7:7 and James 1:14, it is clear that our responsibility is identified as being at that stage. We are responsible for our sin. That remains the point. The question is not about whether sinful desire is sin, the question is about when desire becomes sin.

This question of whether there is a distance between the old man and the new man is important because towards the end of his article, Matthew argues that:

Christians in this life remain sinners, and sin even in our best deeds, because we are polluted by our evil desires. Of course, we should thank God for the wonderful way He helps us resist our attractions to sin. But that does not mean we can account ourselves righteous. Our only righteousness is Christ Himself.

Now, it is worth reminding one another again that the position John represents does not argue, infer or even come close to tending towards the suggestion that we have any other righteousness but Christ himself. We are talking about what it means to live the Christian life, to grow in sanctification, nothing more, nothing less. There is nothing in our position that argues, infers or even tends towards the suggestion that we might be dependent on our own works for justification. I do hope that Matthew will come back and correct his statement.

However, I specifically want to pick up here on his statement that "we are polluted by our evil desires." It would be helpful for Matthew to both explain a little more about what he means by this and to show us where he is getting this from in Scripture because this does not seem to me to give a true feel for how Scripture describes the believer.

Indeed, note the following.

1. We receive the Holy Spirit who fills us. Christ indwells us. God is present with us. Does this fit with the idea of being polluted by sin?
2. Jesus tells his disciples at the Last supper that they are clean (John 13:10).
3. I think there may also be something to consider with regards to the practice of church discipline, where part of the concern seems to be to protect the rest of the church from being polluted.

All of this begins to highlight why proper engagement with God's Word, careful exegesis and much effort and wrestling with the implications is needed.

[1] [Is sinful desire itself sin? A debate on temptation | Evangelicals Now](#)

22 Having the nature of sin

here's an interesting little phrase in the Thirty Nine Articles, it appears in article 9 which discusses original sin. In full, the article says:

“Original sin standeth not in the following of Adam, (as the Pelagians do vainly talk;) but it is the fault and corruption of the Nature of every man, that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam; whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and is of his own nature inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusteth always contrary to the Spirit; and therefore in every person born into this world, it deserveth God’s wrath and damnation. And this infection of nature doth remain, yea in them that are regenerated; whereby the lust of the flesh, called in Greek, *φύσις* (which some do expound the wisdom, some sensuality, some the affection, some the desire, of the flesh), is not subject to the Law of God. And although there is no condemnation for them that believe and are baptized; yet the Apostle doth confess, that concupiscence and lust hath of itself the nature of sin.”^[1]

The phrase is used to describe concupiscence and lust and it is that concupiscence has “the nature of sin. The phrase also reappears in article 13.

“Works done before the grace of Christ, and the Inspiration of his Spirit, are not pleasant to God, forasmuch as they spring not of faith in Jesus Christ; neither do they make men meet to receive grace, or (as the School-authors say) deserve grace of congruity: yea rather, for that they are not done as God hath willed and commanded them to be done, we doubt not but they have the nature of sin.”

The question has recently been asked as to whether this means that the 39 Articles are saying that concupiscence is sin. My response would be cautious here, I would suggest that we need to think carefully both about what we mean by “concupiscence” and what we mean by “sin”. In other words, if you were to ask the question to the drafters, they might say “yes” but then might want to do some careful distinguishing if they were to hear what is being heard when the words concupiscence and sin are used in the current debate.

I’ve talked in more detail about our understanding of what desire is in previous articles and the need to understand that complex anatomy of desires. So, I want to focus here on the question of sin. Too much of recent conversation has focused in on whether or not specific desires and inclinations are sin and need to be repented of or temptations to be resisted with a focus on narrow categories. Yet, when you look closely at the article, you will realise that it isn’t addressing that kind of question.

The article is dealing specifically with the question of original sin and how it affects us both as fallen sinners and redeemed believers. The main point is a response to Pelagianism and I guess would include in that the kind of semi-Pelagianism that characterised the Roman Catholic position that Protestants/The Reformers were challenging. The articles are clear that we don’t simply sin by following Adam’s example, just as we are not justified by following Christ’s example. Rather we are born with a sinful nature and the result of that nature is that that we have a bias towards sin including lust (where I take lust to have that wider sense of craving rather than a narrow focus on sexual lust). This then feeds into article 13, before we believe, even our attempts at good works arise from that sinful nature.

This leads to a question about what happens following conversion? There have at times been some suggestions in some traditions that either at conversion or through some second, later spiritual experience, we are completely freed not just from the penalty of sin but from its very presence. The Article therefore goes on to state that even after conversion, there is an infection, or that there is continued indwelling sin. Where then is our lust, or concupiscence in the sense of wrong desires coming from? The answer is that it is not to do with our new life in Christ but to do with our old fallen nature.

And that is as much as the article says. It isn't attempting to answer our modern questions and as a result perhaps does not say a whole load of things that people are looking for it to say or claiming it says. In fact, it (and the reformers generally) might be seem to say less than we do about the current question. However, there is a sense in which they say more. This means, I think that we would do well to pursue their arguments where they take us, digging deeper and it also means that we also have to do a bit more work at answering the contemporary question.

[\[1\] Thirty Nine Articles of Religion](#)

23 Cultivating the affections

in Scripture is that God offers us identity, we are made in his image to fill and subdue the earth, security, he protects us and comfort, he provides for us just as he gave food for Adam and Eve in the Garden and for the Israelites in the desert.

These are the foundational desires that are met in God. Adam and Eve can be seen to be seeking the same things but trust the serpent's lie that they will best meet their desires by delighting in themselves.

The result of their fall is that sin and death have entered the world. This affects every aspect of creation including every aspect of who we are. Reformed doctrine refers to this as Total Depravity. One aspect of this is that our affections become disordered. We still want those good things, identify, security and comfort but our view of what they look like becomes distorted. We seek the wrong things in the wrong way and at the wrong time, outside of God.

One of the consequences of the Gospel is that God gives us new hearts. We have hearts that love, desire and delight in the Lord. We find our identity, security and comfort in Christ. However, there is a now and not yet to this "new Creation". We still face a fight with indwelling sin. We are to put to death sin in us. We are to grow in godliness. Part of the holy Spirit is to renew our hearts and minds. True, ordered affections may be described in the language of the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace etc.

One of my concerns when engaging with the concupiscence debate is to start to get us focusing on what I've been describing above. This is what we might call an anatomy of the affections, or at least a start at it. We want to properly know ourselves, to understand how our desires work. This will help us to cultivate good and godly affections.

Cultivating godly affections will mean that we stop cultivating ungodly affections. Part of discipleship and pastoring is about helping believers to say no to temptation. We learn to say no to temptation when we begin to tell ourselves the truth about our disordered affections. We recognise that what they take us to be idols. We begin to see the futility of what they offer, the ugliness and destructiveness of sin. That's one reason for regularly confessing sin.

Cultivating good and godly affections must also include saying yes to righteousness. There are practical steps we can take to do this. For example, it means prioritising our time for good and healthy pursuits.

However, the best way to cultivate our affections is by learning to worship. It's only when we are enjoying and delighting in God, when we see him for who he is in all his beauty and glory that we begin to know that Christ is enough for us.

24 Why the debate matters (Conclusion)

I've had four concerns about [the debate around temptation, desire and sin](#) (concupiscence).

1. That the debate has been framed in terms of adherence to historic confessional documents and the comments of historical authors rather than by exegesis and exposition of Scripture.
2. That the debate has pretended to be about a wider principle affecting us all but in reality has focused on one narrow issue, same sex attraction.
3. That the debate has tended towards the academic in terms of its tone and language.
4. That the debate is based on a misunderstanding or misrepresentation of one side's argument. In effect to attack a strawman.

I wanted to just pick up on three crucial implications from these.

First of all, by narrowing the debate down to one application, the impression has been unfortunately given that this isn't to do with all of us. Rather, it only affects one category of people facing one specific sin and this begins to look like some people are being targeted.

Secondly, I was particularly concerned, reading the Evangelicals Now article by the way that Matthew Roberts seemed to be hearing John Stevens and those of a similar view as saying something about justification. In his article, for EN, Matthew writes:

“Is my plea before God based partly on my innocence? Is the Christian's security before God, when troubled by the knowledge of his sinful nature, established partly on the belief that God is not troubled by a sinful heart?”

He sets this out as the big issue but he has created an argument about something that none of us are saying. The question is not about where our security before God is. There is not even the hint of suggestion that we think we can base our “plea before God based partly on [our] innocence.

The problem here is that if those engaging in a theological debate have not been heard, then what about the ordinary member of a church who goes to their pastor and says “Here is this particular temptation I'm battling with.” Will they be listened to and treated as genuine or will their experience be that they experience accusation?

Thirdly, Matthew has assumed that the whole debate is about justification. However, that clearly is not the doctrinal category under scrutiny. If we always go back to justification, then where is the place for sanctification. You see, it seems to be the possibility of growth in holiness that is diminished here.

This brings me back to a point I've raised previously. We can attempt to label and define wrong desire as much as we like but when are we going to start talking about how to cultivate good and godly desire?