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## Childhood Sexual Abuse and Male Homosexuality

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*Is there a link?*

**Authored by Jeff Johnston**

**Warning: This article contains some graphic content.**

*I was about 10 years old when the name-calling began. I was slight of build, intelligent, uncoordinated and musically inclined. The labels of 'sissy,' 'mamma's boy,' and 'fag' were quickly attached to me by the set of older boys in the neighborhood. This derisive verbal ridicule quickly escalated into physical abuse. Causing me physical pain, and watching me cry and reveling in my reactions to their torment became a favorite pastime of these boys.*

*It wasn't long before some of the physical activity, fueled by their adolescent curiosity about sex, deteriorated into sexual abuse. I was held down and forced to perform sexual acts with them. To add to my shame for participating in these acts was the shame of knowing that there was some pleasure involved. The pain of abuse would inevitably lead to the exhilaration of sexual release, something I had never experienced before.*

*From that point on I knew there was something wrong with me. The deep sense of shame made me hate myself. Because of my timidity, I didn't have the courage to face my abusers. My shame became contempt, self-contempt in the form of self-hatred. The part of me that I hated the most was my masculinity. I hated the macho in others but at the same time was drawn to the strength that it represented. I equated the perception of strength with a false definition of masculinity that I knew I didn't have. Gender confusion had set in. I was so weak, I had given in, I had been dominated, I was not a real man.*

*The greatest part of my wounding was the damage done to my sexuality. I believed the lies and labels others had placed on me and for years secretly harbored those thoughts as my identity. My secret fear was that I was gay. (1)*

In his book *Ten Life Choices*, Reverend Bob Perdue courageously relates his story of suffering emotional, physical and sexual abuse. For him – as for many men who are sexually abused – this led to internal struggles with shame and with understanding his own masculinity and identity. Other battles ensued, including struggles with pornography, sexual addiction and homosexuality.

### **Sexual Abuse and Homosexuality**

For years, counselors, pastors and lay people who worked with men coming out of homosexuality noted that many of these men suffered from disproportionate rates of sexual abuse. (2) They recognized that sexual abuse seemed to be one of the risk factors that might contribute to the development of same-sex attractions.

Rev. Perdue, for example, has worked in Christian ministry for more than 25 years. He serves as Chairman of the Board of Directors for **Regeneration**<sup>[1]</sup>, a ministry that helps men and women overcome sexual and relational brokenness – including sexual abuse, sexual addiction and homosexuality. He says:

*I have done a lot of counseling with men who struggle with same-sex attraction. Some have been in the lifestyle, others have battled with lust and pornography. I would estimate that in three-fourths of the cases, there was some sort of sexual abuse or misconduct that formed a powerful memory which contributed to the struggle. (3)*

Other writers have noted the connection as well, although the numbers they cite vary depending on which studies they reference. Drs. Stanton Jones and Mark Yarhouse analyzed data from what is probably the best survey of sexual behavior in America. They write, "Experience of sexual abuse as a child, in other words, more than tripled the likelihood of later reporting homosexual orientation." They continue, "Other studies have reported the same trend." (4) In 1995, Dr. Thomas Schmidt, author of *Straight and Narrow*, cited two different studies about high rates of sexual abuse in homosexual and bisexual men. He writes:

*Nevertheless, it is disturbing to find that although under 4 percent of boys are molested by men, a recent major study found that the rate of childhood molestation by men among homosexual or bisexual men was nearly ten times that (35 percent). It is also notable that 75 percent of homosexual men report their first homosexual experience prior to the age of sixteen, as compared to 22 percent of heterosexual men reporting their first heterosexual experience.* (5)

Many pro-gay researchers, activists and theorists deny that there could be a connection between child sexual abuse and adult homosexuality. Some possible reasons for denying this link are the stigma that surrounds sexual abuse; the fear of associating homosexuality with "recruitment" or pedophilia; and because so many gays continue to believe that **homosexuality is inborn**<sup>(2)</sup> and immutable. In 2008, however, a group of researchers from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published a book that documented the high rates of sexual abuse among "men who have sex with men (MSM)." (6)

In a chapter titled, "Childhood Sexual Abuse Experienced by Gay and Bisexual Men: Understanding the Disparities and Interventions to Help Eliminate Them," from the book *Unequal Opportunity*, researchers analyze and report on data from 17 different studies from the past 15 years. (7) They find the rates of childhood sexual abuse (which they abbreviate as CSA) for men who have sex with men range from 11.8% to 37.0%, and note that "the best-designed studies tend to converge on CSA prevalence of 15% to 25%." (8)

While most of those who perpetrate sexual abuse are men, abusers are not necessarily homosexual or gay-identified, (9) and the authors note that "in studies focusing on MSM, the perpetrators are always at least 90% male." (10) The range of abuse varies in the different studies depending on the definition of abuse and the sample method. (11)

The researchers report that the rates of child sexual abuse for gay- or bisexual-identified men are significantly higher than those found among heterosexually-identified men. They write that the rates for heterosexual men are usually "less than 10%," and state that in five studies that compared the two groups, the men who have sex with men are "at least three times more likely to report CSA, however defined, than heterosexual men." (12) This finding is reiterated in their conclusion: "Rates for MSM are 15% to 25% in the best designed studies, which is at least triple the rates reported among heterosexual men." (13)

### **Consequences of Sexual abuse**

Children are not equipped emotionally, physically, spiritually or psychologically to handle adult sexuality. Individual boys will handle sexual abuse in different ways: what leads to shame and guilt in one child might lead to self-questioning and gender confusion in another or to anger and acting out in a third. Each child is unique, grows up in a unique environment and will respond in an individual way to sexual abuse or early sexual encounters with the same sex.

There are, however, common themes and outcomes that consistently emerge in studies of men who were sexually abused as children. Two common outcomes of sexual abuse – out of the many possible – are that boys may question their identity and be confused about their sexuality. (14)

Dr. Dean Byrd has a Ph.D. in psychology, and postdoctorate degrees in Child and Family Psychology and Behavioral Medicine. Now in his fourth decade of teaching, research and practice, he has provided psychological care for at least 400 men who have been distressed by their unwanted homosexual attractions. He concurs that childhood sexual abuse is a significant issue for many men with same-sex attractions, and points to even more studies

that demonstrate this connection. He also notes that the homosexually-identified men often report earlier ages for their first sexual experience, but often don't consider this abuse:

*There is indeed a clear disparity between homosexual men and heterosexual men and child sexual abuse. Using a non-clinical population of 465, Tomeo et al. found that 46 percent of the gay men reported being sexually abused as children compared to 7 percent of the matched heterosexual men. (15) What's intriguing is that 68 percent of the homosexual men did not identify as homosexual until after the abuse. Earlier research by Johnson and Shrier concluded that boys who had been sexually abused are 7 times more likely to identify as homosexual or bisexual than their heterosexual counterparts. Even more intriguing is that Friedman noted that the boys who later identified as heterosexual had a mean average of 15.7 as the time of their first sexual experience. For the boy who later identified as homosexual, the mean average was 12.7. (16)*

Dr. Byrd continues:

*There is an interesting problem with the research – we have been asking the wrong question for many years. If you ask men if they were sexually abused, many will say "no," because "allowing" oneself to be sexually abused is incompatible with masculinity. However, if you ask men how old they were at the time of their first sexual experience, the data seems more accurate.*

*Sexual abuse causes havoc in the lives of boys – in part because of the way in which our culture differentially responds to boys and girls. Such abuse can certainly have the impact of gender confusion which contributes to gender identity which determines sexual orientation.*

*Most of the men that I have treated over the years have experienced some kind of trauma – some kind of premature introduction to sexuality either in the form of sexual abuse or some kind of pornography along with peer abuse. (17)*

The authors from *Unequal Opportunity* write about some of the outcomes associated with childhood sexual abuse, including "sexual compulsivity;" "shame, guilt, and a long-standing uncertainty about sexual orientation;" "sexual identity confusion and struggle with masculinity;" "more lifetime sexual partners;" "increased risk for depression and partner violence" and "more sexual risk behavior and higher prevalence of HIV infection." (18) Dr. Byrd concurs, and says that some of the "common effects include gender confusion, anxiety, depression, alcohol and drug use. Many reflect the symptoms of PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder]." (19)

In their analysis of these studies on sexual abuse, the CDC authors also list some of the other harmful outcomes of sexual abuse described in the research:

*Some of the persistent emotional struggles reported by men who experienced CSA include anger and rage, betrayal and loss, intense fear, helplessness and loss of control, sexual identity confusion and struggle with masculinity, isolation and alienation, lack of belief in the legitimacy of both the abuse and the aftereffects, enduring negative beliefs about self and others, repressed or compulsive sexuality, shame, and humiliation. (20)*

In reflecting on sexual abuse in his own life and in the lives of men he has counseled and prayed with, Rev. Perdue points to how victims of abuse may struggle with intimacy, masculinity, identity and control. He says:

*Abuse breaks a man's sense of power. Those who were overpowered by another man or older boy feel powerless. Those who were exposed to phallic images that were much larger than their own feel powerless and less of a man than others. This desire for power can become fixated on the male genitalia and fuels an attraction that is really more about power than about sex." (21)*

### **Heterosexuality Derailed**

Of course, not all men who are sexually abused grow up to identify as gay or to have sex with other men. Men report different paths to homosexuality and have different responses to sexual abuse. In reporting on the possible outcomes of sexual abuse, *Unequal Opportunity* is clear that "the long-term effects of CSA represent potential vulnerability to negative

outcomes, not destiny.” (22) But for many of the men who are sexually abused, the abuse is one of the steps on the road to developing same-sex attractions or identity. The adult sexuality inflicted on these boys influences their burgeoning identity, sexuality and behavior.

The authors in *Unequal Opportunity* are reluctant to say that childhood sexual abuse is one of the factors that leads to or contributes to the development of homosexuality, but they do speculate,

*The fact that most childhood abusers of MSM were males suggests either an etiological link between CSA and adult sexual orientation, or the existence of childhood characteristics that are related to adult sexual orientation in men that increase vulnerability, or both.”* (23)

And later, they say that these early sexual experiences “can be considered a form of sexual learning, even if that learning is involuntary and the results dysfunctional.” (24) They continue, “Sexual orientation and gender identity can be particularly confusing for men who experienced arousal during the abuse, and MSM who experienced abuse may continue to be aroused by circumstances that mirror the abusive situation. (25)

Dr. Byrd is adamant that there is no “one thing” that “causes” homosexuality. Humans are never as simple as “cause and effect” – we interact with the environment and are impacted by it, but we also make choices and decisions. He instead employs a model in which humans are born male or female, ready to grow into healthy masculinity or femininity, and ready to grow into healthy heterosexual relating.

Different events – and the individual’s responses to those events – might be contributing factors that “derail” the normal developmental process toward heterosexuality:

*Sexual abuse contributes to the derailing of biological priming which is the process definition for homosexuality. Boys who are targeted for sexual abuse are NOT targeted because they are gay. They are targeted because they are vulnerable. Gender non-conformity – which is the only characteristic that is predictive for later homosexuality – is often characteristic of these vulnerable boys. (26)*

In contrast – and perhaps in an effort to lay the groundwork for identifying and indoctrinating so-called “gay” children – the researchers in *Unequal Opportunity* suggest:

*If a boy’s sexual orientation could be identified when he is a youth, then extra efforts might be taken to protect boys who would grow up to be gay so as to help eliminate the CSA disparity. To the extent that child abusers use gender nonconformity in boys as a means of identifying victims who might be easier to target, parents can help protect all of their children by talking about sexuality, self-protection, and boundaries.”* (27)

Given the unresolved status of this debate, we would argue against labeling children “gay” and call for restraint. The idea that young boys can have an identifiable “sexual orientation” in the adult sense is dangerous. Boys who are gender non-conforming need affirmation and healthy male encouragement; they don’t need to be labeled “gay.” Young boys are primed, as Dr. Byrd suggests, to grow into a healthy sense of masculinity and to develop healthy opposite-sex attractions. Gender non-conformity might derail these healthy outcomes, as might child sexual abuse. However, both of these issues, as the authors also note, do not lead inexorably to homosexual attractions, behavior or identity. And, as we shall see, there is healing and recovery for sexual abuse.

Indeed, to suggest that we should identify “gay children” is ridiculous. Dr. Christopher Rosik, a clinical psychologist, in an article discussing the impact of sexual abuse on men, is also clear on this. He notes that some have argued that the higher rates of sexual abuse among men who have sex with men could be accounted for by the fact that these boys are “born gay” and are therefore open to sexual interaction with men. Rosik responds to this argument by saying, “Given the fact that one is talking about children averaging 10 years or age, such reasoning seems to come dangerously close to blaming the victim.” (28)

Rev. Perdue offers some thoughts about how sexual abuse might affect a boy’s thinking about his sense of masculinity:

*Sexual abuse causes a confusion between the man I am, the man I want to be and the man the world expects me to be. My perception has been skewed by my experiences of sex, and I feel weak, angry, tentative, unattractive, fearful, indecisive and depressed. I want to be confident, strong, patient, decisive, attractive and the life of the party. The world expects me to be powerful, muscular, a fighter, a success, daring and insensitive. (29)*

Here, the sexual activity that has been inflicted on a child is confusing. An abused boy may question why he was abused or begin to think of himself as "different." Such abuse threatens and may derail a boy's growing sense of his masculinity and his identity. The sense of powerlessness and the questions about himself as a boy or young man might lead to envy and a desire for the masculinity he sees in other men. And the interaction of these issues may lead to struggles with same-sex attractions.

### **Sexual Abuse and Healing**

Sexual abuse of boys is painful and deeply wounding. And while the journey is challenging and difficult, there is healing for men who have been sexually abused. Christ's death on the cross brings healing, forgiveness and grace not only for our own sins, but for the sins committed against us. Scripture teaches that Christ spent much of his time on earth healing broken bodies, hearts and minds. And since He is the perfect reflection of God the Father's heart, we know that God longs to bring comfort and grace to a broken world.

Resolving the trauma of sexual abuse is not usually quick or easy. Rev. Perdue points to some of the things that were helpful in his own process of overcoming the effects of sexual abuse: being honest about the sexual abuse; forgiving the abusers and releasing them from his anger and judgment; rejecting the lies he had come to believe about himself; and learning to see himself as God does. In writing about the difficult journey of forgiveness and recovery, he says:

*My driven personality which manifested itself in frenzied religious activity was fueled by anger. Anger at my abuser. Anger at my family for not protecting me. Anger at myself for not fighting harder. Anger at the church for providing no safe place. Anger at God for allowing the abuse and "making me this way".*

*When I finally attached all of my anger to the offenses against me and the lies I was believing and released them all to God at the cross, recognizing that they were paid for... completely, I gradually gained freedom from the anger which freed me from the striving and allowed me to rest. (30)*

Rev. Perdue explains that being honest with himself, talking to others about the events of his childhood, and finding safe places to come to terms with the effects of the abuse in his life were very important for him. He says, "This was huge for me. I had kept this all bottled up inside of me for so long. The abuse, the lust, the same-sex attraction, the shame... it was crippling me." (31)

Finding a supportive community, especially developing healthy, non-sexual relationships with men, was critical in his recovery process:

*Recognizing my own neediness and allowing others to minister to me in those needy places helped me to connect with others in a healthy way and develop some same-sex friendships that were very therapeutic. Fishing buddies, racquetball partners and the like were foreign to me before my healing. (32)*

And finally, releasing God from judgment about the past and developing a trusting relationship with God were critical components of healing and recovery:

*The 'renewing of my mind' with God's grace and truth transformed my view of myself and the world around me, and developing intimacy with God through worship helped me 'get over myself' and eventually develop intimacy with people. (33)*

Rev. Perdue says that healing and growth is a relational process, and not a one-time event. Sexually abused men – like all men – can continue the ongoing journey of pursuing and connecting with God. And His love can transform and restore even the darkest pain of the past and the deepest places in the heart.

That's good news for victims of sexual abuse – there is hope for them. As Dr. Dan Allender writes in *The Wounded Heart: Hope for Adult Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse*,

*You have been damaged. But you have great hope. The mercy of God does not eradicate the damage, at least not in this life, but it soothes the soul and draws it forward to a hope that purifies and sets free.* (34)

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#### Endnotes:

(1) Rev. Bob Perdue, *Ten Life Choices*, (Greensboro, NC: Diakonia Publishing, 2008) pp. 51-55, adapted with permission of the author.

(2) Exodus (<http://www.exodus.to/><sup>[3]</sup>), for example, has often held workshops on this issue at their annual conference, and Living Waters, one of the largest programs used for healing broken sexuality, includes a section on healing for sexual abuse (<http://www.desertstream.org/><sup>[4]</sup>).

(3) E-mail interview with Rev. Bob Perdue, 06 April 2009.

(4) Dr. Stanton L. Jones and Dr. Mark A Yarhouse, *Homosexuality: The Use of Scientific Research in the Church's Moral Debate*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2000) p. 57; referring to Edward O. Laumann, John H. Gagnon, Robert T. Michael and Stuart Michaels, the *Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States*, (Chicago University of Chicago Press, 1994), table 9.14, p. 344.

(5) Dr. Thomas Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow?* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1995) p. 148, see also 114-115; the reference to "4%" comes from a study by J. M. Siegal, et al., "the Prevalence of Childhood Sexual Assault," *American Journal of Epidemiology* 126 (December, 1986): 1141-1153. The numbers on homosexual abuse come from L.S. Doll, et al, "Self-Reported Childhood and Adolescent Sexual Abuse Among Adult Homosexual and Bisexual Men," *Child Abuse and Neglect* 16, (1992), p. 855-64; and the numbers on age of first sexual experience from D.P. McWhirter and A. M. Mattison, *The Male Couple: How Relationships Develop* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prengice-Hall, 1984), pp, 269 and 271.

(6) Because not all men who have sex with men identify as "gay" or "bisexual," groups like the U. S. Centers for Disease Control use terms like "MSM" to describe behavior, rather than an identity. The abbreviation is used in this essay when quoting them.

(7) David W. Purcell, Jocelyn D. Patterson and Pilgrim S. Spikes, Jr., "Childhood Sexual Abuse Experienced by Gay and Bisexual Men: Understanding the Disparities and Interventions to Help Eliminate Them," in Richard J. Wolitski, Ron Stall, and Ronald O Valdiserri, eds., *Unequal Opportunity*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 72-96.

(8) Ibid, pp. 73-74.

(9) Ibid, pp. 72 and 87.

(10) Ibid, p. 87

(11) Ibid, pp. 73-74 and 92.

(12) Ibid, pp. 80-81.

(13) Ibid, p. 92.

(14) Ibid, pp. 72-73 and 85-92.

(15) E-mail interview with Dr. Dean Byrd, 06 April 2009. Here, Dr. Byrd is referring to M.

Tomeo, D. Templar, S. Anderson, and D. Kotler, "Comparative Data of Childhood and Adolescence Molestation in Heterosexual and Homosexual Persons." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* Vol. 30 (3), pp. 535-541.

(16) Ibid. Dr. Byrd is referencing Diane Shrier and Robert L. Johnson, "Sexual Victimization of Boys: An Ongoing Study of an Adolescent Medicine Clinic Population," *Journal of the National Medical Association* 80, (1988); he also references Richard C. Friedman and Jennifer I Downey, "Homosexuality," *The New England Journal of Medicine*, vol. #331 (1994): 923-930, <<http://content.neim.org/cgi/content/full/331/14/923><sup>[5]</sup>> (27 April 2009).

(17) Ibid.

(18) Purcell, et al, pp. 86-92.

(19) Dr. Byrd, interview.

(20) Purcell, et al, p. 86.

(21) Purdue, interview.

(22) Ibid, p. 85.

(23) Ibid., p. 87.

(24) Ibid, p. 86.

(25) Ibid, p. 86.

(26) Dr. Byrd, interview.

(27) Purcell, et al, pp. 89-90.

(28) Christopher H. Rosik, Ph.D., "Conversion Therapy Revisited: Parameters and Rationale for Ethical Care," *The Journal of Pastoral Care*, (Spring 2001): 47-67, <<http://www.narth.com/docs/conversiontherapy.html><sup>[6]</sup>> (6 April 2009).

(29) Perdue, 2008, interview.

(30) Ibid.

(31) Ibid.

(32) Ibid.

(33) Ibid.

(34) Dr. Dan B. Allender, *The Wounded Heart: Hope for Adult Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse*, (Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPress, 1990), p. 247.

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[3] <http://www.exodus.to/>: <http://www.exodus.to/>

[4] <http://www.desertstream.org/>: **<http://www.desertstream.org/>**

[5] <http://content.nejm.org/cgi/content/full/331/14/923>:

**<http://content.nejm.org/cgi/content/full/331/14/923>**

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